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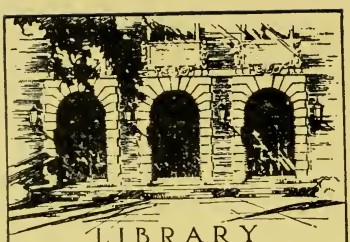

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A Story

IN TWO VOLUMES

BY

M A CURTOIS

Author of "The Story of Meg" &c

"The bridegroom sat at the table head,
And the lights burnt bright and clear—
'Oh, who is that,' the bridegroom said,
'Whose weary feet I hear?'

"'Twas one look'd from the lighted hall,
And answered soft and slow—
'It is a wolf runs up and down,
With a black track in the snow.'"

VOL II

London
REMINGTON AND CO PUBLISHERS
HENRIETTA STREET COVENT GARDEN

1888

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	Ben and his Friends	1
II.	A Party in Low Life	9
III.	A Tea in Higher Life	23
IV.	Mr. Audley gives a Dinner Party ...	31
V.	The End of the Dinner Party	53
VI.	The Wolf Escapes once more	64
VII.	A Sudden Temptation	75
VIII.	An Evening at the Farm	92
IX.	The Moonlight on the Road to London	106
X.	The Backward Journey	126
XI.	The Return of the Wanderer	130
XII.	Will in Refuge with Elizabeth	143
XIII.	The Summer passes	153
XIV.	The Old Wolf leaves the Den	162
XV.	Morning and Night	170
XVI.	Ben has Misgivings	178
XVII.	The Night in the Old Inn	191
XVIII.	Alecto	197
XIX.	Flying Rumours	205
XX.	Mr. Audley comes again	209
XXI.	Geoff has a Dream	218
XXII.	The Farm hears Strange Tidings ...	227
XXIII.	Farmer Gibson meets the Wolf ...	235
XXIV.	Mr. Audley meets his Son	253
XXV.	The Clergyman at Bennon	264
XXVI.	The Last Evening	281
XXVII.	The Fire at Crasten	288
XXVIII.	The Wolf is Trapped at Last	299

CHAPTER I.

BEN AND HIS FRIENDS.

THE stifling summer nights passed on and onwards, and the dreary prison of Ben's apartment became still more hard to bear. The long nights were so endless in their heat and wretchedness, with their sounds of Ben's snoring, and of the church clocks near and far, that even the blindless daytimes, with all their dust and glare, seemed but to prepare the way for them and to be of no account themselves. And yet Geoff, though knowing himself a prisoner, made no effort to escape; he kept himself quiet, and allowed himself to revive slowly from his illness, and waited still. This delay was the result of weakness, but of resolve as well; he hoped to learn more of Ben's meaning, and of his friends in time.

With one of the inmates of the house he had become acquainted, as we have seen, but from that acquaintance he did not hope to gain much at first. That was the boy we have mentioned as living down below, the queer, crooked, comical creature with a monkey look, the boy who was always climbing about the roof and steps. After he had, by looking in one day, discovered Geoff, he became interested in him, and was always to be seen; sometimes hanging head downwards from the roof that he might look in on him upside down, sometimes swinging in the air holding with one hand to the steps, sometimes poking his head in at the window with his tongue thrust in his cheek. But he never performed these gambols when the black-bearded man or Ben was near; some previous experiences had taught him to restrain his spirits then.

Crawfish was the name of this youngster, or was said to be his name; for his "chrisen" name, if he had one, remained unknown. He gave Geoff this information, along with a great deal else, for he had a tongue which, like his limbs, was never still. He talked of his exploits, of which he was very proud, of small thefts and rogueries, and practical jokes,

always of the roughest sort—of "larking with girls," and of getting "screwed in pubs." There was a curious innocence in him, in spite of his bringing-up; the freedom with which he related his small adventures gave proof of that. To Geoff, lying and listening upon his heap of rags, too sore in body and mind to answer much, it seemed strange to hear the tone of patronising wickedness assumed by this younger boy.

And yet, after all, it was a relief to have Crawfish so near—for any companionship was a relief just then. It was not only that the boy, after his fashion, was good to him, bringing him food and drink, and strawberries now and then—not only that he came and sat by him, and talked volubly to him—the very sight of a human being was a relief sometimes. In the long, endless nights, whilst he lay awake and ill, kept wakeful by the moonlight, which threw the shadow of the ladder on the floor, it was a relief to watch Crawfish pass the window, climbing up the steps. For it was one of the elfish habits of the boy that he liked to do this at night; to clamber alone up the ladder on moonlight nights, and then spend hours in crawling about the roofs, much like the conventional goblin that one

sees in plates. When he got tired of play he would steal quietly down again, and Geoff would lie watching his figure as he passed the glass.

It was from this boy, who came often to sit by him on the floor, that Geoff learnt much information about the people in the house, as he grew by degrees stronger and more fit to talk himself. He was particularly anxious to know who were the friends of Ben, regarding them as people it would be best for him to avoid; and was glad to learn there were but two in the place, the man whom the boy called "father," and the mistress of the house. The boy was afraid of "father," who seemed to treat him ill; he was very much stunted from being under-fed, poor lad. But he did not appear to know much himself of the guardian whom he feared; or, perhaps, he knew more, but was afraid to say. The landlady was "allers drinkin'," but "not a bad sort, not she;" and she had "rings an' brooches as you never saw the like." It soon became evident to Geoff's attentive ears that there was some secret understanding between this woman, and man, and Ben.

And he felt still more sure of this when one day feet came up the ladder, and "father"

himself opened the window, and came into the room; and sat down, moreover, on the floor, and prepared himself to talk. The man had a black beard, and dark, sinister face, as we have seen; he had also a rough manner, which he tried that day to conceal. It was the first time Geoff had seen him since he came into the house. What his object was in this visit the sick boy tried in vain to discover, for he did not disclose it himself; on the contrary, he asked a great many questions, to which the invalid made short replies. And after that day he often came again, and seemed to take a peculiar interest in Geoff, even telling him one day he "could make his fortune if he liked." But it was to be observed that he did not appear when Ben was there.

And then one morning the woman also came—a swarthy woman with a red face, and a gold chain round her neck; and she also talked to him, and observed him curiously; sitting down, for want of a chair, upon the floor. Only, like a woman, she observed his state as well; and pitied him for his sickness, and for the rags on which he lay, and made many promises of comforts, which she did not afterwards provide. And then, before she

went, she whispered to him to be sure and not tell Ben—the man, with more insight, had trusted him for that. Geoff lay and considered a good deal when she had gone.

On the whole, it seemed to him probable that these people whose acquaintance he had so lately made had before known something of him or of his birth, though he could not tell whether they had gained their information from Ben or had given it to him. And yet, from their dubious behaviour, it seemed only too probable also that they did not know much, and were even uncertain whether there was much to be known. With these vague ideas floating always in his mind as he lay and thought, he repeated again to himself the story that Jem had told him; and then he remembered to have heard from Crawfish that the woman had been a landlady of an inn far away—why not of that very inn of which Jem had spoken once? In that case it was easy to be surmised how much she knew. But did Ben know more than that? Did Ben know more?

Lying, and thinking, and tossing through the endless nights, it seemed to Geoff just possible that he did, that the vague promises he had held out might have some root in

facts. If not it was scarcely to be conceived that Ben should be so much interested in him, in the boy whom he hated and who had injured him; there must be some strange hope connected with him somewhere in his mind. And yet poor Geoff felt, and could not but feel more and more, that Ben's utmost desire for vengeance might not have hurt so much.

Oh! confused, burning hope, now come still more close to him: oh! vague, terrible, disappointing hope, how it tortured through the long days and through the stifling nights! If it had not been for that he might have been able to decide on something, some plan of action that should take him far away. But now he could not—could not; he must cling to this merest shred of a possibility of learning at length who his unknown father was—the gentleman who had been so willing to sell his son to ruin. Over and over again he heard the words, a mocking whisper for the night-time to repeat—"You would have your son an heir: I'll make him fit for that."

And meanwhile—with this possible heritage still before his eyes, there was the stifling room round him, with Ben's drunken fits at night, and the secret visits of the black-

bearded man, and the gambols of Crawfish, and the weird, moonlit nights, and his own strange weakness as he lay upon the floor. And mingled with these things, like a pervading thought, was the strange terror of mind he had never known before. The *something* that lay before him was long in coming—oh! would he be able to get to it at last?

"Why do ye think on Ben?" asked Rolf, the black-bearded man. "*He* won't help ye, ye may be sure o' that. *I* know some tricks for ye that'll be more worth yer while. Ye are pinched and peakened now, but ye were once a likely lad. Come ye to Lon'on, boy, and set up there wi' *me.*"

CHAPTER II.

A PARTY IN LOW LIFE.

On the same night on which that invitation was given that we have heard, Ben Wilde was spending an evening in the midst of his friends; in fact, they were having a party amongst themselves, a luxury in which Ben indulged himself every now and then.

The party had assembled in the most old-fashioned room of an old-fashioned public-house, and it is therefore easily to be imagined what kind of room it was—a low room with broad window-seats and a beam across the ceiling, and an enormous grate, and great wooden chairs with arms and rounded backs, and a number of glasses on the sideboard,

and some pictures of huntsmen and dogs upon the walls. The party was a drinking party, it must be owned, and therefore of great advantage to the public-house where it was held; and at the same time of no great cost to the entertainer, after all, for each guest paid for all he drank himself. This plan took something of the *shine* off the hospitality of the giver of the entertainment, we must confess; but it had long been a rule of the Gin-shop, and of those within its walls, "Every man pays for his own drink himself."

And this fact had occasioned the expulsion of Ben from the club held in the place, so that he had never been inside the Gin-shop since the night when he had introduced Geoff there some weeks before. He had an innocent habit of forgetting to bring his cash, and of then imploring piteously for mercy when the end of the evening came; and his friends had supplied him with coins for a while, but had got tired of that at last. It was the sight of these maudlin entreaties, accompanied by weak promises and streaming tears, that had served amongst other things to disgust the lad whom the Wolf's Den had reared, and had induced him to leave his master when the next morning came. For

old Jem would not have been likely to entreat for money, he would more readily have *taken* it ; and his adopted son was more daring than himself.

There had been then at the Gin-shop that evening what is called a "row;" and since that time Ben had not dared to frequent the club, and was not supposed to be admitted even into the public-house. How came it then that he was to be found there that night, in the midst of the select circle who had hired a room? I rather imagine that Ben supposed his invitation due to his own intrinsic charms; but it is more probable that it was owing to some curious rumours, lately set afloat, concerning "that young lad Haldan" whom he had chosen to befriend.

"And keep ye still awhile, mates," had whispered the wisest of the party ; "when he's got the drink i'side him his tongue'll be loose enough."

So behold Ben, some way advanced in that road that produces looseness of tongue, in an armchair by the fire, sniffing and shivering continually even there, holding out a trembling hand for his glass to be supplied, whilst his red handkerchief, even looser than usual, seems dropping from his neck. The room

has no candles, it is lit by a roaring fire, and would be bright if it were not dim with smoke; the guests, who are six in number, excluding Ben, are gathered round the table, smoking, and seem soberer than he. In fact, they are very curious to hear the story of the boy, of whom Ben has dropped various words in an intoxicated state, and are prepared to sit there, pretty quiet, till they have heard. But their guest is silent; he has not drunk enough as yet.

At the head of the table sits the chairman for the occasion, a big, broad-shouldered fellow, in a loose coat, with his hat pushed back on his head, and a pipe resting carelessly in his great, shapeless lips. He is the husband of Mrs. Rawson, who keeps a lodging-house, and is celebrated as a convivial fellow, and a good singer, in the town. There are queer stories, *very* queer stories, about him, which men whisper now and then; and he has the power of always keeping sober, or seeming to do so, a somewhat ominous gift in such company as this. But he is very popular, and called a good fellow still. Next to him is a young lad, respectably dressed, and with a face that may be called respectable as well —a young clerk, the son of a grocer, who

has been a mother's darling in a strict and careful home; and who, freed now at last from parental restraint, and left to guard himself, is learning in such scenes and company to know what "life is like." Next to him Rolf is smoking, surly and silent, with a watchful glance on Ben; and beyond him, sitting on the table, with his legs oddly bent, the little Crawfish is one grin and tremor of delight. The other two men are middle-aged, two small tradesmen, with unprosperous shops, who do not allow their wives much money to feed the children with. All these, with the exception of Crawfish, have their minds fixed on Ben; he is to be the joke of the evening, and they are waiting to hear him speak. But they must give him a little time yet—a little time.

"Come, sing up, boys," shouts out Rawson, who is their host. "You're dull to-night. Gi' us a little o' your lungs; sing now!"

"We'll all sing hymns!" said one of the unprosperous tradesmen, with a snuffle and a sneer."

"No, no," whispered faintly the young clerk, becoming discomposed, amidst the laughter of the rest. He had only been used to singing hymns on Sunday nights at home.

"I don't quite like that, I think; we won't do that."

"We'll sing a political song," shouted Rawson, with a rap on the table to enforce his words. "There ain't not a bit o' go in hymns, they're dreadful dull. We'll have a song about drink, and about the price o' corn. And then we'll have one about the girls; that'll fetch us all!"

"You be hanged for a fool," whispered the oldest tradesman to him, bending across the table to whisper in his ear. "We've all come to hear about this lad an' Ben, an' when once the shouting begins there'll be no chance o' that."

"You leave me to manage," murmured Rawson, with a wink, and the offered objection was at once withdrawn.

The youngest of the tradesmen had meanwhile jumped on the table—it was a happy thing that he was small and slight—and from the depths of a husky throat was pouring out that sort of melody that poor people like the best, that peculiar combination of humour, sentiments, morals, and music that is called "A Comic Song."

"And now for the chorus, gentlemen, if you please."

And with raps on the table, and stamping, and shouting, a chorus came at once :—

"Come, Polly,
Let us all be jolly,
I pricked you with the holly,
But away with melancholy,
Let's have no more of folly,
But come and kiss me, Polly,
And drink, and we'll all be jolly."

"Chorus again, gentlemen, if you please."

Chorus repeated, "Come, Polly."

"Come, gentlemen, there wasn't much life in that. We'll try again."

Chorus repeated the third time with terrific stamping and shouting that rang out into the lighted streets beyond.

"And now," said Rawson, settling himself in his chair when the noise had ceased, "we'll have a talk."

"Why, we've got little enow to say," answered Dolby, the older tradesman, to whom Rawson had "tipped," as he would have phrased it, a private wink. "We've got our business to see to, we don't hear much at that. It's Wild Ben as has all the wit, an' all the stories too."

"I say, Ben," went on Rawson, throwing his enormous figure back, and taking his pipe into his hand whilst he puffed out a cloud of

smoke, "tell us what's gone with that lad you brought here some weeks agone. There's a many has asked after him—a likely chap!" The rest were becoming more silent over their smoking now. It had been decided that Ben was to be the joke of the evening, and they wanted to draw him out.

"He's got to your house," said Dolby, "if all I hear is true."

The dark-bearded Rolf was becoming visibly annoyed; it almost appeared as if he wished to stop the talk. From his armchair by the fire, over which he crouched and trembled, Ben answered with fearful asseverations that the lad was far away.

"Why, I seen him only this mornin';" burst out Crawfish from the table; "he came an' sat wi' father an' me downstairs." Rolf turned a dark glance upon him, but he did not heed.

"He's goin' to Lon'on wi' us, he is," said Crawfish, who could be seized with audacious fits of recklessness sometimes; "we're goin' to make our fortunes, him, an' father, an' me. There's lots o' money in Lon'on, an' fortunes to be made. He comes an' sits wi' us, an' then we talk to him." He caught his father's glance, and broke off at once.

There had been a quiet, peculiar meaning in the look Rolf gave his son; but there was some strange meaning too in the glance Ben turned on him. The dark-bearded man seemed unable to bear the look; he drank off the contents of his glass and then he rose.

"Come you wi' me, Craw," he said; "we must be off." He put out his hand, and drew his son from the table, but gently, and without hurting him, though the boy seemed afraid. Then, without regarding the expostulations of his companions, he threw down some money on the table, "to pay for the drink," he said; and, still keeping his hand on the boy, he left the room. He had not looked again at Ben, nor Ben at him. Ben stretched out his hand for his glass, and slowly drank it off, but he was trembling more visibly now, with anger or with fear.

"E'ed better not," he muttered low to himself; "e'ed better not." It was not of Rolf that he was thinking then.

Oh, miserable, cowering wretch, shivering, drinking, and trembling by the fire, the mere broken remnant of what had once been a life, was it possible that any definite purpose could still exist in you, that any power, even of keeping a secret, could remain? And yet a

purpose, a secret, had indeed laid hold of Ben; and though he had long weakened the springs of action in himself, they did not lay hold of him with less tenacious force for that. As far as he could be determined on anything as he sat and drank, the determination to persist in silence was in his mind.

Rawson, on his own part, had his reasons for wishing to "dror him out," or else he would certainly not have wasted much trouble over him. He knew Geoff very well, for the boy had lodged in his house, the ill-favoured lodging-house of which his wife was head, and he had certain private ideas of his own about the lad. He imagined him to be connected with gentlemen (in a left-handed way), and supposed that Ben was desirous of extorting money from the relations of the boy. The big Rawson was, after his manner, a luxurious, lazy being; he left the lodging-house and its management to his wife, and was already himself very heavily in debt. Therefore, this notion of a secret out of which money could be made had to some degree tickled his imaginative mind, and he had determined to set himself to worm it out of Ben. He possessed considerable powers, and Ben seemed to have no power left; it did not, therefore,

appear difficult to get a secret out of him. Only one meets with more difficulties than one expects sometimes.

Nine o'clock.—There had been much comic singing, varied by the "Last Rose of Summer," which the young clerk gave. There had been also a good deal of smoking and drinking, and Dolby had ventured on some jokes. And Rawson had kept by the side of Ben, and supplied his glass; and Ben had confided to him that Geoff was a miserable orphan, whom he was going to educate and befriend. He could not be said to have given much information yet.

Ten o'clock.—The young clerk was already past any understanding, and the rest of the company had determined to charge all they drank to him. Also they had considerately twisted some sheets of paper together, and provided his head with a fool's cap to keep him from catching cold. The rest were tolerably sober, and talking and laughing still. And Ben had been "drored" by Rawson to a very great extent; and had informed him that Geoff was the son of a duke, and had been given to him to rear, in the belief, apparently, that in such hands as his the heir to a dukedom must indeed be safe.

Eleven o'clock.—The Gin-shop was about to close for the night, and the guests in the private room prepared to go. But Ben was already more than "half-seas-over," and could not be brought to understand that his absence was required. He clung to Rawson's arm, calling him with streaming tears his dearest friend — he kept rambling through the story of the child's birth at the inn, with such variations on the original narrative as his state induced. Rawson charged himself with the care of him, and the others with the clerk. The lights were extinguished, the outer door was opened, and the whole party turned out into the night.

Half-past eleven.—In the moonlit street, where shadows looked strange and weird, Rawson wandered along, supporting Ben on his arm. He was very kind to Ben, and promised to do all he could for him, and entreated him to be candid, and confide everything to him. And Ben had been telling a long, confused tale about the dying servant of a gentleman, whom he had nursed, and the gentleman's name was—was—was— Over and over again he repeated this; fifty times over, with confused and broken accents, did he say that the gentleman's name was—

was—and could say no more. And at last Rawson let go of his arm, and he fell down on the ground.

* * * * *

The dim light of the dawn was breaking on the town when Ben roused himself, and raised himself at last. He was still confused, and could scarcely see the dimness; the sense of darkness and of lighted streets was in his head, and he could not free himself from that, or remember entirely what had been. And yet withal he felt rage and terror, too, a dread of having at last disclosed his secret, a frenzy against Geoff, who had plans unknown to him. He would go home and confront him at once; he would force him to confess. Under lights beginning to grow pale beneath the morning sky he made his way with this purpose in his mind, tottering, trembling, half-blinded, putting out shaking hands, scarcely able with all his efforts to guide himself. And beneath that morning sky and those waning lights there were a few others also in the silent streets—men and women who crept along with stealthy footsteps, skulking homewards in silence now that the night was done.

Ah, wolves, poor wolves, so useless, so dangerous, so fond of the night-time, with such dark lairs, such unworthy, savage lives, is there no kind Shepherd, then, to take you in His arms and make a fold for you upon His bosom ?

CHAPTER III.

A TEA IN HIGHER LIFE.

On that same evening, whilst Ben Wilde and his secrets made an attraction at the Gin-shop, and Geoff lay on the floor of the attic, revolving inward plans, the lamp of the dress-maker of Crasten was burning brightly on her table, and Elizabeth was pouring out tea for Liz and Jim.

And certainly it was a pleasant sight, that tea-table, and with more of nature and art about it than one would have been prepared to see; for there were Gloire de Dijon roses in a blue jar beneath the lamp, and the little tea-pot was a genuine Wedgewood, square and brown. Elizabeth had remembered to set out her best things for her guests; and had not

forgotten also to prepare a pile of buttered toast, to get a little loaf that was new and dainty, and some thick yellow cream that added a flavour to the tea. Doubtless there was not the look of farm-house plenty here, but the little tea-table had its own distinctive charm.

Jim observed this with a feeling of trouble that he did not quite understand. There was something in these ways that was different to his own. Liz did not observe them at all, or observed with some slight contempt—the dressmaker was very poor; she felt quite sure of that. Why, what a poor dress it was Miss Harte had on—a worn, black dress that showed many signs of use, although fitting perfectly, and of a stuff that was soft and light. Indeed, Elizabeth might have put on newer raiment; it was her own taste that liked this gown the best. And we may add that she had not chosen ill; her dress suited well enough the worn, thin face above the tea-pot now.

Liz had been selling butter, so she was also in working clothes; but there were beads of yellow filigree round her neck, and in her masses of dark hair were the yellow hair-pins she preferred. She looked exceedingly hand-

some, and had an appearance of luxurious beauty, though her mouth was closed in a passionate, wilful way. In fact, poor Liz had been having trying times at home. Her father had been often violent and unreasonable of late, and only that morning had indulged in another outburst on that one subject which had such fatal power over him. He did not know the effect of his violence upon his daughter's mind. Throughout that day, as she trudged through the long lanes with her butter, or exchanged greetings with acquaintances in the village streets, the surging trouble tossed ceaselessly through her heart. "I *will* care for him, whatever they may say —I will !—I will ! "

Jim had been at work all day, as usual, from the early morning hours ; and had observed her flushed cheeks with some inward discomposure when he met her in Crasten in the evening, as he had agreed to do. Unlike his father, who had few ideas upon the subject, and had almost forgotten that his daughter had been acquainted with Geoff at all, he had some real notion of the influence of the outcast upon his sister's mind ; for, like many other honest men of slow perceptions, such sight as he did have was tolerably clear,

and, though he was not much used to considering the affairs of others, he did sometimes give some of his thoughts to that. "It would be a good thing if she could leave home for a bit, poor Liz!—poor Liz!"

He had that trouble on his mind, and he was in the presence of Elizabeth, which made him shy; therefore he was even less than usual disposed to talk. And Liz was inclined to sink deep in that silent humour that has passionate thoughts beneath, and she had no great conversational power at any time. But then Miss Harte had invited them; it was for her to speak.

"You have not brought Will?" said Elizabeth, as she poured out the tea. "I was hoping to see him, and had bought a cake for him."

"Will's i' trouble again," replied Jim, shortly; "he's allays i' trouble now. I don' know what's at the lad, I really don'. He comes in late, or he breaks a cup, or he forgets what he is told; it doesn't seem possible to him to keep straight through the day."

"Poor child!" said Elizabeth, gently; "he is young."

"He'll learn to be old soon," said Jim, "if he goes on like this. There's father hasn't no

patience wi' him, an' sometimes I'm not surprised. I don't know what's come to him, indeed I don't."

Elizabeth would not answer, though she had a troubled look. Perhaps she might have ventured on a solution if she had dared. There are certain conditions of atmosphere which have a tendency to make objects seem larger than they have appeared before. Will was not, perhaps, more careless, not, perhaps, more playful or idle than he had been; but from the present state of mind of those surrounding him it was certain that no smallest act of carelessness or of idleness in him would pass unnoticed now.

"He may have my cake, may he not?" asked Elizabeth. "I'll put it by."

It was an inward pleasure to her at that moment to reflect that the cake she had bought was rich and had comfits on the top. The sister did not receive her proposal with delight; she told herself inwardly that Will could have cakes at home. And then she touched with some fondness a parcel on her knee, for she carried about generally a piece of work for him.

"It's only a while ago," said Jim, after a pause, "as Will got in a fine scrape, an' I

don' yet know the rights. There was Captain Holt, as is heir to Crasten here, he came over to us and said Will had stole his purse. Will must ha' been i' strange company—I don't know much o' that; an' I thought I'd best spare the lad if I held my tongue."

"Would it not have been better," asked Elizabeth, "to have had the story out?"

"I was afeard Will might ha' been meetin' Jem Haldan's lad."

He had said the words without thinking, in his slow, good-humoured way; but, as he and Elizabeth chanced to raise their eyes, the glance of each was held by the sight they saw—for dark waves of blushes had dyed the cheeks of Liz. Higher and higher they mounted until they stained her forehead up to her hair; it was impossible for her to conceal the agitation that she felt. Jim continued to gaze, with his eyes round with surprise; but Elizabeth, with the greater tact that even a nervous woman has, immediately called to her cat, and gave some scraps to that; and after a minute or two took it on her knee, so that Liz had a fair excuse for bending down. And Liz drew closer to her, though she had not been near before; one woman turns to another in certain times.

A little while later the table was cleared, and they were sitting round the lamp, the two women near to each other as before, and Jim at a greater distance, and yet still close to both. It was a pleasant, quiet scene on which the lamplight shone—the young workman, with his scarred face, watching quietly; the yellow and dark heads of the girls bent close together as they compared their work; for Liz was making a nightgown daintily for Will, and Elizabeth cutting out some mourning with exquisite skill and care. Perhaps there was more colour in her face because she felt that Jim was near, though she took care never to raise her eyes to him.

And Jim? Leaning with both his strong arms on the table and speaking little, he was not able to keep himself from watching her, whilst all the time a strange scene was before his eyes—a dark night, the lights of a public-house, a terrified girl with her hand upon his arm. She had advanced by many years beyond those days, this woman with the thin face and nervous manner, and with speech more cultivated than might have been expected from her birth. It was he who was shy, and he who was awkward now: she knew more than he did; she had got in front

of him. His gratitude mingled with a feeling he did not understand, he could not but be aware of a sense of pain. So they sat together, with the lamplight on all three—the handsome farmer's daughter, lost in her dangerous dreams; the young workman, with his painful feeling of inferiority, now for the first time understood; the young dressmaker, conscious herself of a difference she would not stay to understand, and yet trembling inwardly as a woman trembles when she feels that close to her there sits her early love.

She would bend her head over the work of Liz and admire her stitches; there was nothing hard in that.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. AUDLEY GIVES A DINNER PARTY.

THE summer days of June had come now with all their beauty to Hanorth and Crasten, a warm early summer that filled all men with hope. Already the lilacs and laburnums were in their glory in Mr. Audley's gardens, and Gloire de Dijon roses made creamy blossoms upon the great grey house. In the park the trees looked dark and ragged against the deep blue of the sky, though white mists rose amongst them in the early morning hours: and in the evenings there were the loveliest lights and shadows—mysterious shadows stretching softly on the grass, with the evening light as a golden glow between. From the highest part of the park you could see the

smoke from the village chimneys, where the cottages nestled close into each other's sides. The great house was solitary, for gentlemen live alone.

And yet not unsociably either, though with due regard to rank. Mr. Audley gave a dinner party in those early summer days.

He had left his newly-inherited house often since that evening when he had first dined there alone, and yet he had always, after an interval of a few days, returned to it again. Some secret attraction, either of love or dread, drew him always back to the grey house in the park, with the little lonely village and the width of Fens beyond. It could not be the beauty of the place, for his old home at Langen had more splendid scenery; or its associations, for the place had none for him; or the pleasure of new arrangements, for he disliked the toil of those; or the county in which it was situated, for he had never cared for that. Some other, more inward feeling must have been working in his heart. He could not leave the place or restfully settle there; he seemed to be lingering always, as one who waits.

And yet, perhaps, he scarcely told himself what he was waiting for.

One thing there was he used constantly to do as he sat alone in his study through the lonely morning hours—that is, to take from the secret drawer of his desk the piece of an envelope that we have seen once before (the fragment that bore the postmark of the town near which he lived), and to sit, sometimes for hours, with his head upon his hands, and the torn scrap lying before him on the desk. But he always took care, first of all, to bolt the door. He was often attempting to remember the epistle he had burned—the blot on it, the dirty thumb-marks, the rude untutored scrawl—it was a strange subject of study for a cultivated man to choose.

And sometimes, as he sat thus intent, absorbed in thought, a wish to shape some definite course of action would be present in his mind; and he would almost determine to send for some member of the detective force, or to employ his confidential servant on secret work for him. That wish came so strongly upon him now and then that he even got out a sheet of paper, or laid his hand upon the bell. And yet, he could not—however much he wished—he could not lay bare to others the secret of his life. Those words of the "yung relation" had jarred too

much on him ; he feared to make any movement that should commit himself. No, he would wait, he would be quiet till the summer months had passed ; the writer of that letter must have known something of him once, he might seek him out and make himself known at length.

And one other consciousness there was (it was a consciousness rather than a thought) which just stirred in the lower depth of Mr. Audley's mind ; the servant who had shared his secret long ago was dead, and the fact of his marriage remained a secret still. He need not, then, after all, be afraid to commit himself ; his son would not dare to expect too much from him. In this manner, keeping one most important fact concealed, he could retain the guiding rein always in his hand. But he would wait for a while, before searching for his son ; at least he would wait till the summer days had passed.

Meanwhile he liked to recline out of doors in the golden summer evenings, looking down from the terrace upon the trees and woods, his great mastiff pressing against him with its head against his knee, and a few strawberries, some thick yellow cream, a quaint paper-knife, and the latest periodicals upon

the table by his side. The golden light was lovely between the trees, the evening air would just stir the leaves upon the branches; and there was one vista through which, looking far away, a glimpse could be caught of the smoke of the distant town. No sound from that penetrated the stillness in the midst of which he lay. . . .

The days passed on in a solitude that was almost unbroken. But before that month of June was over an event at last occurred—Mr. Audley gave a dinner party, as I have said.

And, indeed, that was to be a fateful night for him. Mr. Audley had been allowed a long time of solitude, in which to arm himself for all that might occur; but it seems to be in vain that we tell ourselves to get ready for that which may lie before—forewarned, forearmed, with every good intention towards preparation, we yet may fail at last—the crises of our lives come suddenly, and find us unprepared. And this man had drifted in golden ease for many years—it is so easy to let our difficulties rest.

So the summer evening stole gently into the summer day with no token to mark it different from all that had gone before; and then, with a force that had been gathered

through the years, it broke with its thunder-clap upon Mr. Audley's life. And others also were to make a date of that—the fourteenth of June, 18—.

* * * * *

For on that evening, when the shadows began to lengthen, in the quiet time for dressing before the guests arrived, Miss Selina Horley stood in the dressing-room that had been set apart for her, and looked out at the golden light upon the park. Only a few hours before she had arrived, driven over in her little pony carriage by Captain Holt; and at the park gates they had dismounted, leaving the carriage to the groom, and had wandered together to the house beneath the trees. As she thought of his whispered words her face was burning still.

Oh, no doubt it is a pleasant thing to be nineteen years old, and to stand looking down vistas of trees as if down your future life, with thoughts as soft as the dreamy evening light, or as the summer air which murmurs among the branches like whispered words of love. Only it was strange that as she stood there by the open window, looking out at the evening light upon the grass, there was another remem-

brance also that moved vaguely in her mind —the thought of the railway station and its lights, and of the stars above the snow, and of the poor lost boy whom she had tried that night to save.

Like an undercurrent of pity beneath the rising of her own happiness that remembrance moved; it had never been so distinct within her mind before: and with a little sigh at last of mingled pain and bliss she turned from the window to ring for her maid. She must be dressed in her very best, and look her prettiest to-night, for she had fixed the date of her wedding-day at last.

And Mr. Audley also was alone within his room, dressed for the evening, and pacing up and down, with a sense of uneasy disquiet upon his mind. For he had been talking with his old friend, Sir John Horley, about the young people and their plans; and understood very well that a proposition would soon be made to him.

No, he could not leave Crasten, he could not; he would sooner give Langen up; he could not depart from this place with his longing unfulfilled. And yet could that weary longing bring any good to him? There were times when the hopeless waiting seemed to

torture like a pain, when he longed to fling away finally this shred of a possibility to which he clung, to return to his old home with his secret undisclosed, and to believe himself at length a free if a lonely man. His punishment was that he could not, he could not, be at ease. Far down in his mind an uneasy movement stirred; he could not be like men who have lived open-hearted lives. And yet he dared not ask himself after all what was his dread—the fear of some discovery breaking out on him at length, or the fear that there might be nothing to be discovered now.

Oh, he would go down to his guests and do his best for them. He had been a good entertainer when he was a younger man.

So the mellow glow of wax candles made a brightness in the drawing-room, and shone on the old pictures, and the ancient, faded room. And presently the guests arrived, and made added brightness there; an old lady in brocaded yellow satin, who might have come from a picture-frame herself she was so entirely free from all modern ideas of the fashion and its ways; two young creatures, her grand-daughters, in juvenile white muslin, with sashes of blue and pink;

Sir John Horley, enormous and ponderous, taking the utmost care of his swollen, rheumatic hands; Captain Holt, handsome and upright, stroking his moustache, with his sense of personal superiority always strongly marked; two scientific gentlemen, who were Mr. Audley's friends; and an old lawyer with a handsome wife. It was such an assemblage as a host collects together in the country now and then; for in the country one is not driven by necessity to such terrible crushes as London imposes on its victims, but has rather, out of a limited society, to select the best one can. Pretty Miss Selina, in flowing white lace and silk, smiled and whispered amongst the guests like the young lady of the house; and Mr. Audley, from his station on the rug, maintained an animated conversation that was not on science with the young Captain and the two scientific men.

The long, low room was full of creamy Gloire de Dijon roses and drooping sprays of fern; and on some massive cabinets that were dark with age Mr. Audley had caused to be placed the exquisite china that had been sent from his former home. Otherwise he had not cared to make many changes in the room, which was bright enough now

with the sense of life and company, with the light of the wax candles, and the voices of the guests, a dark setting itself which made a convenient foil. A closer inspection would have revealed the presence of many little comforts; its master understood how to make an apartment habitable for himself.

He stood now on the rug, a graceful figure, and kept up the conversation and surveyed the rest with an inward pleasure to which he had long been a stranger, for this sense of social intercourse had its special charm for him. And whilst he talked, and told anecdotes, surrounded by his guests, the moon had risen over the park outside; and there was staggering towards him a visitor whom he was not prepared to see.

Oh, with what terrible suddenness our trials descend on us! If it were not for that we would act better, indeed we would.

The rising moon made a faint light in the park, but the shadows of the trees were not even now distinct; and, staggering amongst them, unable to find the path, with his eyes fixed always upon the lights beyond, Ben Wilde attempted to find his way towards the house. What was he doing there, a miserable creature, in the midst of the peaceful stillness of the sweet summer night?

Let us leave Mr. Audley to entertain his guests awhile, and accompany that visitor of whom he was not aware as yet.

* * * * *

We left Ben in the early morning, staggering homewards through the streets, in the company of a few other such creatures as himself, whilst the light of the early dawn made the lamps dim. His long unconsciousness had sobered him as far as he could be sobered, but in the eyes of others he must have seemed scarce collected even then. And yet there were burning thoughts, there was rage within his heart. He could not remember whether or not he had revealed his secret, and he remembered with distinctness what the boy had said of Geoff. It seemed that his prey was ready to escape from him.

His anger served as a distinct purpose in his mind; and in spite of his want of soberness he was able to mount the steps, which had a strange look in the dim light of the dawn. Still shaking with rage and fear, and yet more steadily than he would otherwise have moved, he climbed in at his window, and entered his room at last. There was one thing to reassure him—the boy had not escaped.

A tallow-candle, which was almost burnt out, lighted the room; and Geoff was lying upon his heap of ragged clothes. He was not asleep, and he did not look as if he had been sleeping much; he had rather the appearance of one who has been thinking, and who has been scarcely strong enough to bear his thoughts. If he had looked well, excited, with his wild temper ready to be aflame, Ben would have been afraid of him; but he appeared only utterly weary and prostrated, and the older man had not the restraint of fear. He burst out on him with furious reproaches, with broken words, and oaths; he accused him of breaking his engagement, and threatened him with both foot and hand. "He would gi' him something to learn him like," he said.

"Don't touch me," muttered Geoff, shrinking, as he turned his face away. The spiritless answer had the opposite effect; Ben seized a piece of rope that was lying on the ground, and struck him across the shoulders, and then across the face. The boy gave no answer, he only hid his face; but by the movement of his shoulders Ben could see that he cried. Then something—could it be pity?—stirred in the older man; he stood

quite motionless, whilst the rope dropped to the ground. With pacific intention he then bent over Geoff; and, after a few instants, touched him softly with his foot, and the lad, who had been lying still, turned his face round to him. A hard, set face, with its dark eyes fixed into an expression that Ben could not understand—it did not seem to be the moment for reconciliation then. By the light of the expiring candle Ben staggered to his bed, and threw himself down on that, and fell into a heavy sleep. He had accomplished more than he had meant to do; those two blows, struck in the morning twilight, were, perhaps, the first seed of a harvest that was to be reaped that year.

But that day of reckoning was still some distance off when Ben went staggering in the moonlight under Mr. Audley's trees. It was of another reckoning that he was thinking then.

He had risen that morning with a raging headache, but with a stronger purpose than usual in his mind, and it was observable that he took nothing but water with his morning meal. Then, before starting as usual, he had addressed Geoff once more, and forbidden him to leave the room throughout the day.

The boy made no answer, but only looked at him; and Ben climbed out of the window and down the steps. And then a sudden idea seized him, and he returned once more; and, taking the piece of wood that served as an outside shutter, he bolted it carefully across the window of his room, by this means effectually securing Geoff within. The boy had been quiet that morning, and had not said a word, and it was characteristic of Ben that he believed him to be cowed. He made inquiries downstairs about Rolf and Craw, and was told that they had left the place the night before. With a mind, therefore, somewhat relieved Ben departed from his home.

And then he did not go on to the market-place as usual, but wandered about the streets, and even into the country and amongst the lanes and fields. It was not that he had anything in common with the wild roses and the leaves, there were purposes waiting to be formed within his mind.

For a very long time Ben's beery life had been in possession of a secret, which, strange as it may seem, he had for years contrived to keep; the years that had passed since the day when he had stood by the bedside of a dying man, and had heard his delirious

murmurs about "the little 'un what was sold." The man, who seemed to have been a servant, had been taken very ill; he was a stranger in the town where he was, and no one knew his name, and Ben, who was lodging in the same house, undertook to watch by him. Through the whole night long he had heard a delirious story, which, repeated over and over again, had impressed his mind at last; and just before the dawn, which witnessed the parting breath, there had come a murmur of Mr. Audley's name. Ben had never thought proper to reveal what had been told, and he continued to keep the secret he had heard. But that broken tale of a night-journey, a dead woman, and a forsaken child had not moved him very much; after weeks and months it almost slipped from his mind, recalled only once when he came to live near Crasten, and heard as the name of the heir Mr. Audley's name once more. And then after that he had come to know Jem Haldan, and had listened one night to his drunken story of a forsaken child.

Strange that there should thus have come in his way two stories so like each other! But then there are many strange things within

this world of ours. Ben's fuddled brain was not in a condition to trace connecting links; he had just sense enough to keep his own tale concealed, and to let the two lie together loosely in his mind. There followed his imprisonment and his feud with Jem, and long years of drinking and of attention to his stall; and it was not till one night, after a conversation with Rolf and Mrs. Giles, who repeated to him with minuter details the story that Jem had told, that he remembered once more the words that the dying man had said, and it occurred to him with a significance that had not seized on him before that the two histories might have one common source. By diverse ways, and without effort of his own, the threads composing a secret might have been placed within his hands.

Let us, then, pause for a moment, and think what Ben could do, and what was the extent of the knowledge committed to his care. He knew from the dying servant (who repented deeply his own share in the transaction) that a gentleman named Audley had entered into a secret marriage, and had afterwards parted with his child. He knew, or supposed he knew, from Mrs. Giles, that the boy was still alive within Jem Haldan's home. He knew,

too, that the heir of Crasten bore also the name of Audley, and that he was said to be an unmarried man ; but of that gentleman he knew no more. He had no money with which to enter on inquiries ; he hated both Jem and Geoff, and had no wish to bring wealth to them : but at the same time it was strongly impressed upon him that such a secret as that of which he believed himself possessed might prove a lucrative source of income in careful hands, although in his weakened mind there was not much strength to act. He contented himself with writing to Mr. Audley that letter of which we know, directing that the answer should be sent to the post-office of the town in which he lived ; and relapsed into inaction when he found no answer came. Only, from day to day, as he minded his stall or drank, that vision of easy wealth remained with him.

And, remembering the state of life in which he always lived, the weakened physical conditions with which he had now to contend, it is not surprising that the vision, vague at first, took more hold of him as days and nights passed on.

The arrival of Mr. Audley at Crasten excited him very much ; he believed himself to

have been told that this was the man he sought, and supposed that it was only necessary to introduce his son to him. But here this feeling became crossed by another that had power on his fevered brain—his suspicion and hatred of Geoff were like insanity itself, and he could not divest himself of the belief that it was needful to watch the boy. With this object he had attempted to get him completely in his power, to withhold from him all needful information, and yet, by vague promises and threats, to attach him to himself. There is a sort of low cunning in the world that cannot choose open ways, not even when open dealing might be an advantage to itself.

Wandering about amongst the fields and lanes, with the effects of last night's carouse still ringing in his head, Ben wrought himself on that summer morning into a state of fever, from which came a great resolve. There was a plot—a plot—to steal Geoff away from him, to take him to London where he could not be found. But he would not allow it, he would not; he knew "tricks more worth nor that." He would go to Mr. Audley at once and tell him all. Mr. Audley himself was going that night—so he imagined—he must make haste

and reach him or he would be too late. With such ideas rushing and singing through his head, he turned back again through the lanes towards the town. And then on the way he passed a public-house. The rest of the miserable story need not be told — with a mind utterly and hopelessly confused he set out once more.

Ah! poor miserable wretch, staggering along in the moonlight under Mr. Audley's trees, what secret on earth would be safe within such hands as yours? The light was round him — the pure and holy moonlight —the shadows of the trees stretched their length across the grass, his only consciousness was of the fever in his brain. Hurrying and staggering, and knocking himself perpetually against the trees, he pursued his reeling way as best he could. In his wretched condition lay Mr. Audley's chance; he was fast losing the power to tell a secret now.

The garden was only separated from the park by a paling; beyond that the moonlight fell upon the beds of flowers, and beyond those again the house rose against the sky. The dining-room windows were wide open, so hot was the summer night, and the light

streamed out from them upon the path, and with that also the sound of voices came. Ben leant against the paling, which he had reached at length—at length—and stood looking with a wavering glance towards the house. He felt tired, sleepy; it would be pleasant to lie down.

No, he must go on, for there was a plot, a plot; they wanted to take his money, to steal Geoff away from him; they would get Mr. Audley to London, and hide him there; they would do everything they could to keep him from his rights. But they should not do it; hooray! they should not! he would see them splintered first! He tried to climb the paling, but he was too far gone for that.

Feeling his way along the paling he discovered an unfastened gate at last; it gave way to his touch, and he found himself on the short-mown grass within. The house was before him, the voices came out to him. Avoiding the lighted windows, which gave him terror, he staggered along the grass till he reached the gravel-sweep. The front of the house was before him, and the steps; above them the doors stood open to admit the summer air. He had a very dim idea what the meaning of this great mansion was;

there were moments when he imagined it a public-house. But he knew that he must go boldly up those steps and assert his rights. He staggered up them accordingly and found himself in the hall. The great hall, with its dim lamplight and dark pictures, did not surprise him much; only every now and then he kept forgetting where he was. He passed into an antechamber with faded couches, on which the guests had left their wraps; and went on further into the drawing-room itself.

The sound of the voices from the dining-room came in to him; he stood in the great, low room amongst the flowers and ferns and china, as horribly out of place as some strange monster might have been, or as revealed sin in what has seemed a gentle heart. Every instant it became more difficult for him to remember; he could hear the voices, but they conveyed no sense to him. He stood, rubbing perpetually his bleared eyes with his hands, with his knees leaning against a bronze satin ottoman, trying always to recollect what purpose had brought him there. For there had been something—something—only he could not think what it was. The sound of voices came and went, and seemed always to draw

him nearer; he opened a door that was close to him and went in to them.

The sudden hush and silence that was on the whole room at once; the brilliant lights, for it was more lighted than the last; the feeling of confusion and terror that fell now on himself; the blank sense that something overwhelming had happened, though he could not tell what it was; these things came with stunning force, and he had no power to move. And then the fever and delirium overpowered him once more; and, stretching out his hands to the gentleman who sat nearest to him at the bottom of the table, with a strange, overwhelming instinct that this was the man he sought, he poured out such words as were prompted by his excited brain.

"Misser Audley—Misser Audley—'ee must speak to ye—'ee am yer *son!*"

CHAPTER V.

THE END OF THE DINNER PARTY.

If a moment of agony is a just requital for years of secret dealing, Mr. Audley had his just recompense as those words were said.

He had scarcely seen the miserable wretch who in this inexplicable manner addressed him before his guests; he had no means of explaining the entrance of such a creature into his house, he had no time to consider the meaning of the words that had been said. Blind, dumb, deaf, an awful horror upon him, a singing and rushing like that of a torrent in his ears, he had no power to grasp the situation or to control himself. With a blind sort of movement he rose up in his chair; and then sank down again, pale and breathing hard. He had no power to observe the

impossibility of the statement that had been made; here in his own house, before his own guests, in the fullest security that he could command, he found himself confronted, as by a delayed and horrible vengeance, with the phantom of a son.

He had no power for action, and perhaps that was not strange. But the guests, who had been struck into silence at first by sudden terror, recovered themselves more quickly than himself. Lady Manders, indeed, who had taken the head of the table, to which her yellow, brocaded satin gave dignity and grace, could not restrain herself from the short, sharp screams that expressed her feelings well; and her pretty grand-daughters had turned pale with fear. But the two scientific gentlemen appeared to be amused; and Selie looked with quick anxiety at Mr. Audley's face; whilst Captain Holt, very sensible of the absurdity of the situation, and wishing to help his host and relation from an awkward position, rose at once.

"Hallo, Mr. Audley; what gentleman is this?" he said.

"Some tipsy lunatic from the town asylum, probably," the lawyer observed quietly, as he stroked his chin.

"Oh! oh! *oh!* a lunatic from the asylum!" screamed the lawyer's wife; "oh! don't let him come near to me. Oh! keep him away. Oh! let us run upstairs and lock ourselves up, he'll kill us all! Oh! why do they let such horrid, horrid creatures roam about. Oh! take hold of him—take hold of him—oh! oh! *oh!*"

Ben, meanwhile, continued standing by Mr. Audley's side, smiling with tipsy blandness upon the assembled guests.

"Come, look here, my man," said Captain Holt, coming up to him, "you get out of this. What shall I do with him, Mr. Audley? You have but to say."

But Mr. Audley was panting too much to be capable of speech.

"Misser Audley, *'e* knows," announced Ben, with tipsy dignity; "there isn't no need for you to try your games on *him*. He knows as I were born . . . in a inn . . . where he came that night . . . an' 'ee am his son . . . his son . . . "

His voice was too thick for words.

"Had you not better call yourself his father?" asked Captain Holt.

"Take him away; call my servants, don't listen to him," whispered Mr. Audley, faintly.

"I do not know him, he is a liar; do not believe what he says."

"Believe it!" burst out Captain Holt, with a shout of laughter, that was even faintly echoed by the other guests. "He must have strayed in from outside, this fellow; and he is too drunk to understand what he means. Shall he be kicked out, or shall he be detained?"

By this time the footmen who were present had gathered round; so that Ben was almost enclosed, though no one laid hands on him. Ben, on his part, continued to offer statements, though what these were it was difficult to grasp. He stood in the midst of the footmen, a ragged figure, with the ends of his frowsy red neckerchief hanging loose. The confusion that reigned in the room it is impossible to describe; the ladies were almost crying, and the men were excited too. Only the old lawyer, ceaselessly stroking his chin, kept his quiet attention on Mr. Audley's face.

But Mr. Audley himself was recovering his self-possession, which in those horrible first moments had entirely deserted him. And he was a man who, when occasion required, could act with grace. The sense of peril roused him, bewildered as he was, and

already beginning to be aware that there must have been some strange mistake; he must stop this drunken man's mouth at any cost. He rose accordingly, and with more calmness now, though his heart was still beating till he could scarcely breathe.

"I am very sorry," he said to the company, "that you have been disturbed. My servants had better remove this fellow at once, and keep him in safety till I can examine him myself. And I must apologise for my helplessness as well. The sudden surprise of this visitor was too much, I am subject to palpitations which disable me. The ladies have been frightened, I am afraid; but this is but a drunkard's freak, there is no cause for fear."

He spoke with the assurance of a master, in spite of his panting breast; and his words were successful in restoring calm. The servants, without further delay, laid hands on Ben, who became at once possessed by excitement, and struggled hard, vociferating that "'ee had come to tell Mr. Audley what 'ee knew." Finally, and with much difficulty, he was borne off at last, ejaculating indistinctly, and struggling all the way. And Mr. Audley fell back in his chair again, and closed his eyes.

"I must beg your pardon," he said, rousing himself with an effort, and sitting up once more, "it is really true that I find myself ill to-night, the intense heat of this summer has tried my health. With your permission I will go to my room and rest; and Holt here, as my relation and heir, will take my place. In a little while I hope to be able to return to you."

"Oh, certainly—willingly, sir," said Captain Holt, rising at once from his place by Miss Selina's side. Mr. Audley cast upon him a sick, despairing glance; he was wondering if this young man had his secrets too. The rest of the guests were beginning to settle down into calm, and the footmen had recommenced handing the *entrées* round. There could not be a more favourable moment for retreat; Mr. Audley rose from his seat and left the room. Through the lighted passages and up the great staircase went the master of the house, as fast, in spite of his agitation, as if he were being pursued; he lifted the curtain that hung before his door, and bolted himself into his own room at last. There, in the midst of the dark hangings with which he had surrounded himself, he fell down on the ground; he lay prostrate, with straining hands, before a crucifix on the wall, not for the sake of

praying, for he could not pray, but as the mere outward expression of the agony of his soul. And yet he must be firm, he must make a decision now.

Half-an-hour later the guests had assembled in the drawing-room, but Mr. Audley had not returned to them. Miss Selie, intent on doing the best she could, had sat down to the piano, conspicuously like a bride in her white silk and lace, a fair object in the great, faded room. She had contrived to induce the two youngest guests to sing, and they had grouped themselves by the piano, a pair of doves in white muslin, and cooed a soft duet, which became slightly out of time towards the close.

"You know, Mary," commented the elder, in an audible murmur, "you always hurry there."

Then one of the scientific gentlemen, having a tenor, and the other possessing a very creditable bass, and Miss Selie and the lawyer's wife attempting a contralto, the whole party arranged themselves to sing a glee. Captain Holt, meanwhile, whose vocal powers were not extraordinary, and who, for that reason, perhaps, considered the study of music an "awful waste of time," found himself reduced to conversing with the old lawyer

upon the rug. The scene that had just taken place was in the minds of both the men—they talked about the affairs of the nation, it is needless to say.

And, meanwhile, whilst the strains of joyous music were uplifted by his guests, whilst the light of the wax candles shone on bright dresses and on flowers and ferns, until even the old dark drawing-room looked bright, while such gaiety and festivity took place in one apartment of his house, Mr. Audley was entering one of its back rooms alone. There was a look upon his face that had never been seen there since that day, years ago, when, for the first time, in the lonely inn, he had beheld his child.

"You may stand up and speak to me," he said, sternly, to Ben, who rose up, almost sobered, from the floor of the empty room. "I have come here to see you, and to hear what you have to tell. You may tell me the truth, I will make it worth your while; you will gain in no way by telling lies to me."

Half-an-hour later, with a step that did not tremble, Mr. Audley entered his drawing-room, and was surrounded by his guests. He was very pale, but he assured them that he had quite recovered now. And through the

remainder of the evening his manner charmed them all; he seemed anxious to make up for any discomfort they might have endured that night. As for the man who had disturbed them—oh, he was gone.

But it may be that when his guests had departed he did not feel so much at ease.

And Ben, meanwhile, only partly sobered by his interview, was staggering to the town by the light of the waning moon, amidst shadows not more fantastic than the visions which he saw. His ill-timed excess and excitement were ringing through his brain, but a confused sense of drunken triumph remained with him.

For, oh, he was going to be rich, he would be a great man now; Misser Audley 'ud pay him to tell about his son. He had told Misser Audley that he knew a secret; he was to come the next day, when he was sober, and tell what the secret was. As he went staggering along the moonlit roads that night he was not even yet quite sure what he would say; for with the drunken hope of riches that was working in his brain his old resentment mingled its confusion too, and he kept on repeating with broken words and oaths that it was not in his mind to "make a

genelman o' Geoff." And yet he clung to the vision of riches for himself; he 'ud be a great man—'ud be "wi' the princes now." Alas, for the gentleman father and wretched outcast son, whose hopes lay resting within such hands as these! What sorer punishment could years of wrong have claimed than such dependence upon a being like this? That penalty of evil was being exacted now, the uncertainty of prospect that has nothing sure beneath—as the tipsy, miserable creature went staggering to the town the hope of two human souls wavered up and down with him.

* * * * *

Still meditating, though in thoughts mostly too confused for words, Ben reached the high road, and then the town at last. The moon had been waning during the last hour or two, and the short midsummer darkness was upon the lighted streets. He began to walk more wearily now and to falter more; the public-house he passed was closed, or he would have entered there. So, faltering and staggering, and dragging himself along, he reached at length the steps that were outside his home.

The outside shutter was fastened as he had left it; he stood on the ladder, and drew the

bolt aside, and with fumbling fingers lifted the window of his room. All seemed dark and still within, and he was seized with sudden fear. He climbed hastily inside, and struck a match. The room was empty, save for himself; the boy was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOLF ESCAPES ONCE MORE.

We left Geoff lying on his heap of ragged clothes, whilst the window was bolted upon him from without, so that the light and air of the morning were both shut out from him. He did not struggle or speak, or attempt once to resist; the grating bolt had warned him that to move would be useless then. For on the ominous passion of his nature, which we know, had been grafted, by hard experience, a more ominous self-control.

In spite of that, and though he kept himself motionless, he was in a state of greater excitement than we have seen him in yet. Through the whole of the long night he had not slept, and during the last part of

it his nerves had been strained to a tension that was scarcely to be endured; it was like a miserable, burning madness in his very limbs themselves. And yet he kept himself still; he was too weak to move. He would keep quiet through the next day, and would both eat and sleep, and then he would be strong when Ben came back at night. If the old man had observed him carefully that morning, which he did not, he would have seen that look as of a watching animal in his eyes: he was not aware of the danger which that very quietness showed.

Only there is a limit to the self-control of seventeen, and Geoff had not so much power over himself as he desired. In spite of all his efforts he could neither eat nor sleep; he lay with his eyes shut, and tried to rest in vain. His mind kept looking on towards Ben's return at night, and with his uncertainty as to what he should do or say there mingled a vague terror that he could scarcely understand. For with the "I'll learn him, I will, to lay his hands o' *me,*" there came the confused remembrance of another morning too—the morning of the day on which he had struck Jim Gibson on the face. If it had not been for that day, and for all that followed

that, he need not have left the Wolf's Den as a vagabond on the earth, he might still be climbing for birds'-nests with the other village lads. But Ben had bolted him in; there was no escaping now.

He might have been lying like this for two hours, or rather more, when he heard a slight moving of the shutter, and started up. The room was dark, save where, through the chinks of the shutter, the summer light came in, and one of its larger holes was now obscured. Through this hole, beyond which the glass was broken, a whisper came.

"Hollo, my lad, are you at home here to-day?"

"Oh, I am—I am!" cried Geoff, with excitement. "He has bolted me in to-day; just let me out."

He had not known who had spoken, it did not seem that it mattered much; but, as the heavy bolt fell and the shutter was pushed aside, he saw looking in on him the black-bearded man.

"I'm glad to see ye," said Rolf, as he pushed the window up; "I want to come in, my lad, and talk to ye."

Geoff would not answer or appear to welcome him; he threw himself down on

his ragged clothes again. Accepting the action as an invitation, Rolf climbed slowly in. The boy lay reclining with his face half-turned away, a sort of sullen distaste in the attitude he preserved. Rolf would not seem to be offended; he sat down on the floor, with his eyes drawn somewhat together and on his companion's face.

"I say, what's come to ye, Geoff, the morn?" he asked; and, a little ashamed, Geoff slightly moved his head.

In an instant the colour started to his thin cheeks as he saw the expression on his companion's face.

"Why, who's give to ye that fine mark, Geoff?" said Rolf.

The boy fell back into his old attitude again.

"It was Ben come last night an' beat me," he muttered below his breath, with some effort, however, to keep calmness in his voice.

Rolf did not answer for a minute, but only looked at him.

"An' what did ye say to him at all the while?" he asked. There was an indifference that appeared to be assumed about his tone.

"I didn't say nought. I'll see him the night again."

And again there was silence whilst both men seemed to think.

"Ben thinks that he's stronger than ye now ye are weak. He thinks he can do as he pleases to ye now."

"It's like he can," answered Geoff, and said no more.

He was lying quietly on his heap of ragged clothes, with one of his arms hanging loosely down his side. The man's glance was held for an instant by the resting hand, and then by the whitened face.

"I say, boy," he burst out suddenly, as if the words forced themselves, "if ye have that sort o' look often upon your face there'll be something to reckon for on that hand o' yourn some day." And almost as if he were startled Geoff looked at him. It had seemed a genuine impulse that brought the words, but Rolf had the discretion to turn them to account. "Look here, Geoff," he went on, with great earnestness this time—he sat always, clasping his knees, upon the floor—"I want ye to listen to me once for all, ye see. We are starting for Lon'on this even', me an' Craw, an' it isn't like as we'll get back here agen. I'm going to start in the pawnbrokin' business there, an' I've such a chance

as a man has once a life. Such premisses—swell premisses—ye never saw the like; they might be belongin' to a gentleman, they might. . . . An' there's many a secret bit o' business too. If it wasn't for one thing I'd not dare to tell ye that."

He had evidently not intended to say the last few words, and had added them on account of the want of interest that the boy displayed. They had their effect; Geoff showed more attention now.

"An' the one thing I have to say to ye, my lad, is this"—Rolf kept a keen gaze upon his companion's face—"come ye to Lon'on wi' me, an' set up there. It's such an offer as I'll not make once again: I 'ouldn't do it if I hadn't an eye for ye. Why, just look here for a bit, my lad, look here."

He took from his pocket carelessly a handful of gold, which filled his fingers so that some of the coins dropped through. Geoff's eyes followed them as they fell upon the floor, but he kept himself very still, and said no word. And Rolf picked them up, and put the gold back again.

"*Ye've* not had so much at a time, my boy," he said. "No, and ye're not like to if

ye go on like this. Why do ye stay wi' Ben? Ye'll get no good, he'll starve and beat ye, an'll happen do harm to ye. An' if ye get mad wi' him one day—one day— There's a dozen things ye could do in Lon'on town—there's many an artis' as 'ud paint a boy like ye. Yes, an' wi' me there's a hunner things to do, a well-lookin' lad 'ud be the makin' o' the place; wi' ye an' a pretty gal I'd be quite set up. I don't tell ye everythin', I donna dare just yet. Oh, ye are thinking, perhaps, as I leather Craw too much; but ye're not the same as him, though he be no son o' mine; an' I'd not do the same to ye, I'd be too feared o' ye."

So on and on, in a grating, monotonous whisper, Rolf poured out the promises which were persuasions too, sitting upon the floor with his arms upon his knees, with his eyes fixed always on his companion's face. In his persuasions, in his promises, in his hints of daring adventures, in his display of gold, in the very mysterious vagueness with which he invested both hopes and fears, he gave proof of a skill and experience that were not to be denied; he knew how to approach the nature with which he had to deal. And Geoff was young and miserable, and possessed with

ghastly fears—there seemed no reason why he should not comply at once. But he had been too well trained himself to show easily what he felt; he lay and listened with little change of face. And perhaps there was something else besides eagerness in his mind. He disliked and distrusted this man, whose brutality he felt and knew; he dreaded to put himself completely in his power; his very quickness of intellect, as we have seen before, made him fear to adventure himself upon unknown ground. And yet—to lie still again and wait for Ben—he did not say anything, but he did not refuse; and when Rolf offered him gold, "for old acquaintance sake," he allowed the coins to be put into his hand.

Immediately the man opened the window, and whistled for Craw to come; and the crooked monkey, who had been climbing on the roof, came down at once, and appeared within the room. His father must have arranged matters previously with him, for he did not require a word, but, without waiting for explanation, threw himself on Geoff, with expressions of the most wild and vehement joy.

Rolf turned away softly, and stood looking out; and Craw held back Geoff, who was about to rise.

"You wait a minute, Geoff," he whispered low to him; "I want to say summat to you as father doesn't hear."

Then, as Geoff, startled somewhat, held himself still to listen, he threw his arms round him, and whispered in his ear—

"I *am* glad you're comin' too, I really am."

And then, hastily springing from him, he went to his father's side.

The little, pathetic murmur had effect; Geoff no longer thought of resistance. They all three sat on the floor and arranged their plans.

These appeared to be more complicated than seemed needful to the lad, who could not suppose himself treated with the openness he desired. Rolf had entirely determined to leave the town that day, and wished to be starting for London before noon, and yet he would not ask Geoff to accompany himself and Craw. On the contrary, he urged the new companion not to start till night, perhaps to avoid suspicion of their united plans. He even said that he could not receive him in London till the next morning came; and of his London business he would still only give vague accounts. It appeared to Geoff, who

asked little, but whose acuteness pondered much, that he was afraid to trust him too far as yet.

However, Rolf assured him they would soon have their fortunes made, that they would be "rich as gentlemen," and "live like princes" then. And Craw climbed about him, and hung upon his back, and whispered that father would not beat him now. And so they climbed through the window again at last, after Rolf had written his address, and the London trains at night; and the man turned back with a sinister smile to him, and Craw made a parting grimace of a most surprising sort; and so, like uneasy visions, they were gone, and Geoff lay down on his ragged clothes once more. A church clock close by struck the last quarter before noon. He had some hours before him, there was no need for haste.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised himself, and folded the ragged garments and laid them straight; and got his cap, and moved quietly about the room as though there were any good in setting things in order now. His mind seemed to be in doubt, and as if he were too tired to think; he was not quite certain where he was going, or what he would

do. There was one thing only certain to him—he meant to escape from Ben, and loose hold of the false hope that had tortured him so long. He sat down on the floor, and clasped his knees at last.

And then he got slowly up, and went to the open window, which he had never passed since he had first been ill. The hot summer air came in upon his face; the noontide sunlight was glorious on the roofs; a sense as of young exultation touched his heart. He pushed the window more open, and got slowly out — his limbs had become stiff and sore, unused to move, but there was a feeling as if his old agility would return. He stood on the ladder and raised the outside shutter, and bolted it carefully across as Ben had done. Had he bolted those miserable weeks within with it? He stood looking across the great, wide view of roofs, all bathed with exultant sunlight, like a new and brighter life. And then, with footsteps that moved more quickly, he went down the steps.

CHAPTER VII.

A SUDDEN TEMPTATION.

He got down the steps, and went out into the streets. He found himself moving slowly, for his head was faint, though the warmth and sunlight seemed to revive him as he went. Where was he to go now? What could he do?

Oddly enough, it amused him, this sense of freedom; it felt like a holiday, and as if he could rest himself. For he had gold in his pocket, he had not forgotten that; there was no thought of starvation now to give him dread. Only he did not feel as if he wished to touch the gold; some strange doubts about it lingered in his heart. And if he went and bought food with it—a vagrant in

ragged clothes—it might cause suspicion, and then he would be watched. It would be good if he could earn a few pence for himself.

So thinking, and wandering aimlessly through the streets, he found himself come on the market-place at last. The first sight of it roused him and made him start, but the next glance informed him that he had no cause for fear. The place was deserted, and Ben's stall was not there.

He had been roused from dreaming, however, and looked round now with care. The great piece of asphalte in front of the Exchange was entirely empty, and dry and hot beneath the midsummer sun. At one corner of it a woman with a market-basket stood, leaning against the lamp-post, with her basket upon the rail; and close to her, on a bench, a young man was sketching, with his elbow upon the railing and his head bent to his work. Some carts were passing in the High Street close to them; it was all distinct beneath the intense colour of the deep blue sky above.

Geoff stood within the enclosure, near where he had stood once before, with his eyes on the woman with the basket, and on

the sketching man, and his thoughts upon the pence that he had set himself to earn. At first he thought of offering himself as a porter, but he had small hope of success in that; a respectable woman does not employ a ragged lad. And, besides, even as he looked at her she prepared herself to go. The artist remained still where he was, engaged upon his sketch; and Geoff stood near him with shyness, afraid to speak, for he did not know what more cultured taste has learnt—that even rags may be of consequence in an artist's eyes.

It was so that it came to pass that as the young man raised his eyes he found them held all at once, and unexpectedly, by the figure that he saw. He had been making a vigorous sketch of the houses and the streets, and had been so much engaged in dreaming of a suitable model that he even now rubbed his eyes.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, after this, "how did you come here, my friend?" Geoff only blushed, with one of the quick changes of expression peculiar to him when in any way disturbed, and the involuntary action supplied the colour that was wanting in his face.

"*Hallo!*" cried the gentleman, more and

more surprised. "What good thing have I been doing to get such luck as this? That dark head, that attitude, and that blue sky above. . . . Why, it's a picture, a Murillo; I never saw the like. I say, boy, you just stand still, and take off your cap, and let me draw your head—I'll make a careful study of it; I vow I will! Now, where is my charcoal? Oh, hang it! I must have a go at this!"

He was a man with a fair beard, who had a young, engaging look, though there were some careworn wrinkles beneath his eyes. With a good deal of low, tuneful whistling, he got a sheet of paper out at once; and pinned it rapidly to his canvas, and began to draw. It would seem that he was pressed for time, for he made most fearful haste, but his rapid strokes had vigour, and even care. "Oh, ghosts of the Old Masters, that I should light on a face like this!"

"There, that's something the sort," he proclaimed, when a fine, rough sketch was made. "I'll take some notes of your colouring. . . . *What* colouring you have! Ever been a model before? You shake your head. There, look at yourself; you don't look amiss, you see!"

Geoff looked at himself, and then at the

artist who had drawn him, with the smile that could rise in his dark eyes like light. The young man seemed most unwilling to let him go.

"Just stand as you are, and I will sketch your figure. Leave your hand on the rail; don't twitch it; do you hear? Confound you, don't move it like that; just try to keep it still."

Geoff tried, and then tried again, but without success, for the twitching nerves and muscles refused to be controlled, his hand continued shrinking, as if it knew itself observed. The young man kept shaking his head backwards in an irritated way; he was becoming excited, that was plain to see. And, at last, as if he could control himself no more, he spoke.

"Are you made up of moist toffy?" he said. "There's not much stuff in *you*."

"I've been ill a good bit," answered Geoff, "or my hand 'ud never shake."

"Ill, have you? Poor lad," said the young man, with a smile. "Ah! well, keep as still as you can, and I'll do my best. *There's* an outline sketch for you," and he threw it on the ground. It was done in a few strokes, but was vigorous enough.

"And now then, I'll have just another look at you," he said slowly, as he rose and threw down his canvas, and began to fasten his easel up. "You say you've been ill, you look like it, and half-starved, perhaps, as well. May I ask how you got that strange mark upon your face?"

"The man beat me as I've been living with," said Geoff.

"The man you live with; have you relations of your own?"

"No, sir, I've not, not as own me," said Geoff, as his colour rose. The young artist was looking very steadily at him.

"And have you been a good sort of boy?" he asked, in a careless tone, but with the direct gaze of his eyes. They were grey eyes that might ordinarily have seemed careless themselves, but they had a curious keenness when they fixed themselves like this.

"No, sir, I've not; you'd not call me that," said Geoff. He was very weak physically, and his lips trembled as he spoke. With a singular movement the young man drew in his own; his fair beard concealed the expression of his mouth.

"Not good, not respectable, not owned by your relations, an outcast of the streets, and

all that sort of thing," he said. "Ah! well, I don't know that I have the right to be too hard on you. Well, ah! well, my own relations are much like yours, you see; I do not think they would have much to say to me. Ah, well, well, well, we people who are not respectable ought to have some pity for each other, don't you think that, at least?" He looked at his companion, but the boy could not speak.

"You have learned more than I have in one or two things, you see;" the young artist went on speaking, with a strange smile on his face. "I have not been hungry, or beaten, or on the streets as yet. That is to come, perhaps; I would not say it's not; Heaven knows we are punished sometimes for our faults. And now, what shall I pay you for all you have done for me?" He took out his purse, and emptied the coins into his hand; and then, taking three of them, he held them out. "I have only six shillings for the present," he said cheerfully; "and I give three to you. Would you take my whole purse, do you think, if you had a chance?"

"I took a purse once, but I was nigh clemmed," said Geoff. His instinct was fine enough to induce him to tell the truth.

"And you don't look much else now," replied the young man, with a smile; "well, take them, and do the best you can with them. I say, I don't like to leave you, and yet I am going at once. Just wait a minute, there is something I have thought."

He shaded his eyes with his hand, and waited, and then he spoke.

"There's a friend of mine who has done a great deal for lads; I'm afraid he's not been able to do so much for *me*. It is Canon Nort, in this parish; everyone here knows the man. You may go to him to-night, and tell him you've met with me. And he'll give you some work to do, or get you into a Home. That'll set you up for life; but you'll have to be good, you know."

He tore a leaf out of his pocket-book, and wrote down the address.

"There, take it, that is if you like, and make use of it if you can. It's hard lines, the path of virtue, but it may be worth the trial. That is all I can do for you, or I would do more." His eyes met the boy's almost wistfully as he spoke, and he caught up his easel and sketches, and hurried off. Geoff remained where he was, looking after him, lost in thought, with some new ideas in his heart, and three shillings in his hand.

The kind gentleman, kind gentleman, he would not see him again, the gentleman in the loose brown coat, with the grey eyes that fixed themselves or laughed. Oh, he could not feel just as he had done when he had left the steps; there was sounding still in his ears the kind voice of a friend.

The three shillings lay still in the palm of one of his hands, and he turned them over with the fingers of the other, with the mechanical movement of one who is in doubt. This was more than the few pence he had hoped for; he need not be in trouble now. Yes, and there was no present need for him to touch the gold, the accursed gold that seemed to burn his pocket, though he scarcely knew why he hated and dreaded it so much. Silver or gold, three shillings or three pounds, one path or another lay indeed before him now.

And with whatever feelings he might have viewed the straighter path, whatever natural distaste for it might have been in his heart, the friendly voice had subdued him for once. With rapid decision he made up his mind; he would go and buy food and satisfy hunger first, and then walk out to Crasten and seek Miss Harte, and in the evening return to the

town again. He felt too weak to argue, and let the matter rest.

So, moving at last from his place, he went dreamily through the streets, leaving the market empty beneath the deep blue sky. There was a little milk-shop in a small street; he entered there, and drank a great tumbler of milk, and felt refreshed. The shop was small, but clean, and there were new rolls and rusks, he was able to eat ravenously after he had drunk. And then, when he had paid the little maid in a white apron, who seemed interested in him, he went out into the narrow street again, feeling better and stronger than he had done for a long time. He went next to a barber and had the long hair cut, which, not so crisp as it had been before his illness, had been hanging in heavy masses upon his head. And after that he felt more trimmed and comfortable, and ready to walk out into the country, as he had meant to do. He went slowly through the streets and past the villa residences; at a small shop he stopped again and bought some buns, and then got out into the high road and into a lane at last.

In a field near him some boys were playing cricket; he could hear their merry voices and

their shouts as he went on. He had been famous at Hanorth last summer as a cricket player; he wondered if he would ever be able to play the game again. He passed a little cottage in a hollow, all embowered in trees, with some fading lilac blooms on the bushes by the door, and a little stream gurgling over the stones close by. He got over a stile, wondering to find himself so weak, and knelt down by the stream and bathed his face and arms; and then sat down by it in a hollow where he could be concealed, and took out the buns and ate them, less ravenously now. The grass grew long by the water, and there were forget-me-nots in it; he gathered a number of the flowers and strewed his knees. And then he rested, leaning against the bank, with the flowers on his knees and the sound of the water in his ears. There was no thought of any want of decision in his mind.

No, for once more there had sounded in his ears the warning that was emphasised by every experience of these last few months of miserable life; the same warning that had been little heeded by him when a child at Sunday School; that he had heard in the whispers of the young lady who had pleaded with him on that first night upon the snow;

that he had felt in the thrill of the fingers of the dressmaker, whose passionate earnestness had seemed to drag him back from ruin. And now this young man, who would not even call himself respectable, had said the same things to him again; and had turned from the midst of his own life, whatever that might be, to show him the way to another and better path.

This wretched, false hope of being able to prove a gentleman his father—this pawnbroking in London, or receiving of stolen goods, whichever it might be—what good at all were these things likely to bring to him? He dared not retract again; he would try to escape from wrong at last.

And yet, do we utterly condemn him, this boy of seventeen, when we add that the path of virtue had little charm for him? Alas! there could not be much hope of any steadfast principle in any one of the lads whom the Wolf's Den had reared; and, susceptible as Geoff was by nature to good as well as ill, he felt the passionate, vagrant nature that lay beneath. He dared not imagine how he would be able to endure a life beneath control. He would go and see Elizabeth Harte instead of thinking about it—the artist's voice

was still in his ears, and he did not mean to change. For he had only the alternative of Ben or the hateful London life; it did not occur to him that any temptation might arise.

So he got up again, and set out towards the Fens. He could only reach Crasten that way by a round of many miles, but he chose to go by the lanes that would take him near the farm, because it seemed to him possible that he might fall in with Jim or Will; and he had the day before him, there was no need to haste.

The summer sky was deep blue above his head, the little pink Herb Roberts were on the banks, and the hedges even yet were white and sweet with may. He kept gathering flowers all the way as he went, long blades of grass to cool the forget-me-nots in his hand, white, graceful stitchworts on slender, drooping stems, and blue germander speedwells, whose blossoms fluttered and fell, and were carried away in a moment by every breeze that blew.

There was not even a cart in the lonely lanes, and the wide Fens lay round him, deep blue beneath the sky. If anyone had met him his appearance must have seemed strange, this tall, ragged lad with his hands so full of

flowers. The lanes became heavier as he went further on; and then at last, although in the distance still, he saw the chimneys of Rose Cottage against the sky.

It was strange that he seemed to feel then as if his work was done—he was hot and spent, and was much inclined to sleep. The road on which he was led directly to the farm; he had often played here on summer days with Will. He was not quite certain if he should go on or not. Close by him a great oak tree stood in the hedge; he laid himself down, so that his back leant against that; and then, keeping the flowers in his hand, he let his eyelids close. They sank on his eyes with a delicious sense of rest. He seemed to be once more by the cottage with lilac blooms, to hear in his ears the sound of the little stream, and then, through darkness grown deeper, to hear voices calling him, soft voices, like music, that sounded from far away.

The sense of a touch—with a start he sprang up, awake at once. There was a sunset glow over all the country now; and there, bending over him looking down on him, was a young girl's face. He sprang up in an instant, and caught Liz in his arms.

* * * * *

Oh, that one long moment, straining, rapture of embrace—was it wonderful that to the outcast this should seem rest and bliss at last? He had not thought of her, he had never meant to meet her; and now, beyond expectation, he held her in his arms. For that one long instant he held her close and tight; and then, stooping down, he showered kisses upon her forehead, taking her face and caressing it between his hands. She did not resist him, did not even let go her hold of him; and so, still clinging together, they sank down on the grass.

"Geoff! Geoff! Geoff!" cried Liz, in a sobbing, crying murmur; and, letting her head sink on his breast, she burst out weeping there. "Oh, Geoff, I have wanted you, I have wanted you so bad; an' father's so cruel to me, an' has turned me fro' the house; an' I never thought to find you, I never thought —"

The choking sobs allowed her no breath for words.

Geoff did not answer, or even attempt to speak. He had pushed back her shady hat, and stroked her dark hair with his hands. But he was almost alarmed himself to feel his own excitement: the fierce beating of his heart was like a pain in him.

"You won't send me away, Geoff? You will take care o' me?"

She raised her head from his breast to say these words. Her hat and dark hair had fallen on her neck, and her eyes were swollen with crying, but there was a quivering smile, like that of a child, upon her lips. There was something intensely pitiful in her look and words. Geoff sat with his arms round her, and her head upon his breast, looking down with a devouring gaze on her.

"It was father," whispered Liz; "he's been mad wi' me to-day. He spoke o' you so as I couldn't bear it, although I've bore it long; an' then I got mad, like, and I spoke up mysel'; an' he struck me an' swore at me, an' said he'd ha' none o' me; an' I threw mysel' fro' the house, an' said I'd go to ye."

"An' now you need never leave me, never," whispered Geoff, in a murmur so faint that he could hardly form the words; and yet it seemed to him as if those words sealed his fate.

"I never thought as I'd find ye, never," sobbed Liz to him; "I thought as I must go home an' face 'em all agen. But I won't go back to 'em, never, an' hear such things said o' ye. He's struck me an' swore at me; I don't owe nought to him. I'll never go back to him."

Her eyes were blazing now.

"No, never, Lizzie, my Liz; ye'll stay wi' me."

"But ye look so poor, poor Geoff," she murmured now, with a smile, the trembling smile of a child that has heard some words of love. "I don't feel as if I oughter to burden ye for me. I'll go off away fro' home, an' do the best I can; I've not been brought up to it, but I'll do my best; an' we'll meet again, maybe, some day—some day."

She raised the face he held close to him, and looked up in his eyes.

Then something swelled up in Geoff, and rose, and overcame — a fierce, overcoming sensation he had never felt before; the violent passion of his unmastered nature; the burning resentment he had felt so long; the lonely months that had known no sense of fellowship; the resolve to retain the beauty he held within his grasp; and yet none of these things entirely, nor all of them combined, a throttling, burning misery that gasped and overcame!

"I am goin' to Lon'on, Lizzie; I ha' money, gold, an' hope. An' I'll marry ye honest, I will; an' ye shall come wi' me."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EVENING AT THE FARM.

THE door of Rose Cottage was open to admit the summer air; the sweet summer evening stillness reigned without. It lay in lingering light on the wide outlook of Fens; it bathed the trees in the garden with golden glow, and touched Jim softly as he stood by the garden-gate. Within, in the great kitchen, the tea had long been laid, but Liz had not come in from out-of-doors as yet.

The afternoon had begun with a storm that had not been in the sky, but there had been peaceful stillness through the long hours afterwards. Farmer Gibson, indeed, had not found himself able to direct his men; he had been helped to his room upstairs by his wife

and Jim, but there he had fallen into a heavy sleep. And his wife had drawn blind and curtain to keep the sun from him, and had got out her mending-basket and come downstairs, for on Wednesday afternoons she was accustomed to mend the clothes. She had the presence of Jim for once to support her nerves to-day, for he had come home early that morning from the town; and, whilst she mended shirt-sleeves and socks in her big arm-chair, he sat and smoked on the other side of the hearth. The hardest household work had been done in the morning hours, there was an afternoon leisure and peace about the place. But neither mother nor son seemed to be much disposed to talk. Once only did she address him; and though her words were few, they had obvious reference to the scene that had taken place that day.

"Liz donna know your father, or she'd not anger him like that. I can't think as she likes the lad as did such harm to ye." Jim only smiled, he was not so sure of that.

So the long, peaceful hours of the afternoon wore away, and Mrs. Gibson's needle went in and out, whilst Jim took out his pocket-book and made mechanical drawings there; and the light slowly changed upon the kitchen walls.

It was scarcely possible not to feel a sense of peace. And then Will came in, quite happy and bright, from school, with some wild rose-buds and a penny pack of cards; and though he asked at once after Liz and tea, was quieted immediately by his mother's troubled face. With his assistance Mrs. Gibson laid the table, and then returned to her chair and her work again; whilst Will, hid up in a corner, played beggar-my-neighbour with himself. Jim had drawn a long while, and was stifled by the heat; he went out and leant against the garden-gate.

The evening brightness was round him, bathing the trees with gold; its peaceful stillness was over all the earth, it seemed like a rest even to the trouble in his heart. Above his head little red clouds were floating; the sunset colours and light were beginning now. And still there moved in his mind the scene on which he had returned, his father's violent clamour, and his sister's maddened face. Oh! would they ever be happy within their home again? Or would he ever be able to make a home himself?—he had not been strong as he used to be this year. Oh, what endless misery Geoff Haldan had brought on them! . . .

As he stood leaning on the gate beneath

the sunset light, it was natural that his thoughts should turn to the cottage in the wood, to the girl with the strange face, who had been able to save him once. "She can't help me now; poor Lizzie, she can only trouble me: I'm a poor, rough working-lad, an' feel dazed an' shamed wi' her. An' yet she troubles me, an' I can't get her fro' my mind; I'd like to do a bit for her after all she did for me. She looks a bit lonely often, poor girl—poor thing! I'll make a box some day or an easy-chair like for her; she'll not care much for that, but there's nought else I can do;" and as if his mind were settled, he turned to go. And yet he turned back again, and lingered still, with the evening light round him, on the garden and the Fens. Through the miserable hours that followed, and the confusion of his mind, that peaceful evening light was always before his eyes. . . .

Some time later he was in the kitchen; he had been drawing again with his pocket-book on his knee, whilst Will, still hid in the corner, continued his game of cards, and by the table Mrs. Gibson moved about. Every window and door was open to let in what air there was, and the red clouds of the sunset looked in on them.

"I can't think where Liz can be," Mrs. Gibson said; "she's not been i' the house sin' she went out. It isn't like her to stay away like this."

"She'll happen come in sometime," answered Jim, without looking up. "Go you, Will, an' see if she's in her room."

"I want to finish my game of cards," said Will, in whom some of the ways of a spoiled child lingered yet. But as his mother made a hasty movement he rose at once. He stole in again quietly after a minute or two had passed, and reported that Liz was "nowheres i' the house;" and, having said this, hid himself with his cards again. Mrs. Gibson kept by the table, moving restlessly about.

"It's gettin' so late," she said; "I donno what to do. I don't like to sit down to tea till she come in."

"She's happen with someone at Hanorth," answered Jim. "Let's wait a bit for her, mother, and then have tea."

They did wait a good while, till the sunset colours failed, and the summer evening twilight was upon the view without. The farmer was moving above, as they could hear, and presently his heavy footsteps came

down the stairs. But he did not come in to them, he passed the door; and they heard him going by the back-door, from the house. The tea remained on the table, but no one sat down.

"Do you have tea now, mother," insisted Jim.

Mrs. Gibson yielded reluctantly, and they sat down. The meal was as plentiful as usual, and there were scones and cream, but Liz was not there to pour out the tea to-day. Mrs. Gibson rose once, declaring that she heard her at the door, and was cross then with Will for asking when she went out.

"She'll come in when your father comes in," the poor mother said.

"They'll have to meet some time or another," insisted Jim.

And then the tea was finished in gloom and silence; and Mrs. Gibson lingered near it, unwilling to clear away, whilst Jim went to the corner and got out his hat.

"Look here, mother," he said, "I'm going to see to Liz. It's gettin' late now, an' time she should be at home. You give father his tea, and get him to his room."

And, without waiting to hear more, he left the house. The twilight shadows were fall-

ing on the Fens, and the light in the kitchen was growing fainter now.

Mrs. Gibson went out and brought her husband in; the farmer had been lingering outside near the back-door. He did not ask for Liz, though he looked round the room for her, and then sat down to his tea in a silence that seemed like that of shame. Alas! how many times he had found reason to blame himself since that fatal morning when Geoff Haldan struck his son. But it was the fault of the wolf; it was no fault of his. He had been revived by his heavy sleep and the sweet evening air, and Liz was not present to confuse him now, so he gulped his tea down hastily, and then went out on the farm. And Mrs. Gibson called Will from the parlour, and cleared away. It was getting later and later, and Liz had not come in.

"I can't think what have come to her," the mother said; "she'll sure not be angry wi' your father all these hours. I did hope as a daughter 'ud be some good to me; they allays say there's a differ 'tween boys and gells. You get out your books, Will, as soon as tea is cleared; your father 'll be at ye well if ye're idle now."

And then, leaving Will to his books, she went to her daughter's room.

And now let us imagine the poor mother standing there, in the bedroom with the open lattice window, through which the evening air came in. With restless mother's fingers she turned down the bed of Liz, and arranged the sheet, and put the pillow straight. On a chair at the foot a little half-made night-gown lay, of the fine bleached calico Liz would always have for Will. Mrs. Gibson folded this, and laid it straight. And then, with a restless face, she stood still by the bed, with her arms hanging down by her sides, as if she did not know what to do. She stood quite still there whilst the light failed in the room, and through the open window the first stars could be seen.

"Mother, father wants you," cried Will from the stairs, and with a slight start she moved herself at last: it had seemed to her as if she did not know how to move. With a long, weary sigh she went slowly down the stairs. The farmer was in the kitchen, walking restlessly about; at the first glance she could see that he was uneasy too.

"Mother, how 's this? Will says Liz has not come in."

"An' what do you go frightin' your father for, you tiresome boy, when there's no need for you to say naught to him? No, she's not

in yet, she'll happen be comin' soon. She's gone over to Hanorth for the arternoon, maybe."

"She had ought to be in by this," the farmer said.

It was evident that he was not happy in his mind: he kept walking always up and down the room. And presently he burst out with fierce words and oaths on Geoff, his footsteps coming still faster as he spoke.

"And she cares for him, she does, an' it's true she does, the fool! . . . If ever I live to get him atween these hands o' mine . . . An' yet, if it hadn't been for that miserable varmint there, as helped him, an' encouraged him, an' wasn't ashamed to see him, she'd not 'a thought o' him. . . . An' there ye go, wi' your head bent o'er yer books, as if ye'd done nothin', an' wasn't ashamed at all. . . . Ye get away, I can't bear the sight o' ye."

"Will, take your books to the parlour," Mrs. Gibson said.

"I haven't done no wrong now," faltered Will, with starting tears.

But he gathered his books together with trembling fingers; and, clasping them in his arms, prepared to leave the room. He had not gone far when his father called him back.

"Ye come here to me, I must speak to ye," he said. Will trembled so much that his poetry book fell down; but it was his instinct, as usual, to obey. He came to his father, trembling and shaking, with his books clasped in his arms; and the farmer, detaining him, laid his strong hands on him. "Ye listen to me," he said, in a voice that shook with passion, "for this is the last time I'll speak to ye like this. Your sister has left the house, an' I canna tell where she be; an' all this harm that has happened it's to ye I lay it down. If hurt comes to her, ye shall answer for it, I say; the same roof shanna shelter or hold us both. An' if ye dare to stay I'll know how to murder ye. An' now get along wi' ye afore I hurt ye now."

He let go of him with a push to make him move; but Will was too shaken with terror to find the door, his knees knocked together, and he almost dropped his books. His mother took hold of him, and put him from the room; and put him into the parlour, and closed the door. The room was dark, save for the rising moon. He dropped his books on the table, laid his head on them, and cried. . . .

And, meanwhile, whilst terror was in the

parlour, in the kitchen there was gloom; the farmer continued always to walk about, his restless footsteps having more speech than words; whilst Mrs. Gibson sat by the hearth, absorbed in grief. After a time he went out; and then the mother rose, and began to walk up and down as he had done, talking always, fast and in a low tone, to herself. She said that Liz had been a good girl all her life . . . that she wasn't meaning to vex her father, she did know that . . . that she might come back; it was getting late, so late . . . and so on and on, in a ceaseless, chattering way. The great moon rose in the sky, and looked in on her; the two farm-boys whispered together outside the house, and now and then they looked in at the windows too. She could not bear it at last, and drew down the blinds; and then lit the candles, and got out her work—she kept on doing a few stitches, and then starting up, and walking about, with her hands clutching her sides, and then sitting down again. She could hear the farm-boys talking and moving about outside. The great clock in the passage struck nine . . . and then ten o'clock. . . .

And then suddenly the farmer burst in on her once more: the noise he made in open-

ing the door echoed through the house. His face was purple, the veins on his forehead were swollen, his hands were clenched, he could scarcely get out the words that gasped with his breath. She rose from her chair, feeling her face grow pale, whilst the bursting words found way for themselves at last.

"The lads are talking o' what she said as she left the house. If she's gone to him, indeed, I'll—I'll—"

He could say no more. She stood looking at him with blank eyes and pallid face. And then, more quietly, the door opened, and shut again.

"Please, master," said Evans, the labourer, "Mr. Jim's come back."

She could hear the strong footsteps, as he spoke, outside the house. A sudden silence fell upon all the place. She heard him asking the farm-boys where his mother was.

"He's happen got summat to say," then Evans said.

It seemed to her as if even her heart stood still.

The kitchen-door opened, but Jim remained without. The farm-boys pressed into the kitchen to hear what he had to say. And then the parlour-door opened, and Will came

in. It seemed to her as if the room were full of men. And still she could see the figure of Jim outside the door.

"Is my mother here? I must speak to her," he said.

"Oh! master," cried the youngest of the farm-boys, "don't say Miss Liz is dead."

The boy had caught hold of his arm in the excitement of his words. Jim turned very quietly, and looked round on him.

"No, no; she is alive. Is my mother there?" he said.

It could be seen by his manner that a weight was on his mind; there was something strange both in his appearance and his words. The kitchen was full of people, but he did not look at them; he went slowly down to where Mrs. Gibson stood. She stood with her back to the fireplace, without the power to move; and everyone else who was present was silent too. He went slowly up to her, and put his arms round her. And then a full minute passed before he spoke.

"Mother, you've me an' Will," he said; "you've me an' Will."

It was over; the words had been spoken; there could be no doubting now. And then it was to Mrs. Gibson as if a great stream

surged in her head, as if mighty waters were rushing in her ears ; the kitchen grew dark around her, and she fell on the shoulder of her son.

That night Elizabeth Harte sat up late with a mourning order ; and, hot and tired, her eyes dazed with sewing black, she opened her door at midnight to let the moonlight in. On something else than moonlight her startled glance fell at once—a child was lying, exhausted, on the stone outside her door ; and, as she stooped to raise him, she recognized little Will.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MOONLIGHT ON THE ROAD TO LONDON.

THAT moon, which shone in its beauty on Mr. Audley's trees, which bathed with glory the Fens beyond the farm-house door, and touched with its silver the dark firs round the dressmaker's little house, had risen, bright, clear, and full on another scene that night—a lonely country road, with dark hedges and with trees, and a path on which two wayfarers found their way, side by side.

They went along silently, without speaking, or touching each other, or turning to look round them as they went. They carried no bundle, though they were walking in the night ; but the young man had broken himself a thorn-stick from the hedge, and the girl held

her dress with care to protect it from the road. And, although they did not touch each other, they walked always side by side. It was like a dream to them to find themselves thus together in the night, to hear the sound of their own footsteps as they went along.

And was it all happiness, that strange, dreamlike feeling, that unaccustomed closeness, and that mysterious sense of change? They did not look round on each other for question or reply; they did not stop to exchange any word of hope or love. It was almost strange to see two companions young as these, in an intimacy as close as this night-journey showed, who yet seemed to care nothing for any look or speech—absorbed, perhaps, in the thought of that longer journey together which they had chosen now.

The unstained moon rose full in the clear night sky, the shadows of the few trees fell across the road, there was no sign of any human being near. There seemed something endless in the look of the silent road, as if they had started on a journey that would never cease.

"It's a very long bit to the station, Liz," said Geoff; "but if you can hold out awhile there's an inn where we can rest."

"We had better get on as far as we can," said Liz.

It was the first time she had spoken for a long time, and she did not like to hear her voice; there seemed something strange in it, like an unaccustomed thing. And yet it was good in him to have that thought for her. She would have liked to take his arm, but she felt afraid: she dared not make any attempt to get nearer to him now. Oh! it all seemed so strange—so strange to her.

"Look! what a great moon there is in the sky," said Geoff, and for the first time there was something of his old manner in his words. She looked up into his face, and faintly smiled. They drew a little closer, and walked on as before. The moonlight was in front of them—the long, lonely road—already the hour of the sunset seemed far away.

Liz tried in vain to soothe herself into calm; the sense of being a dream was the greatest calm she gained. Already it was not strange to think that they were without her at home; the old evenings at home were even now far from her. She had given herself up to this lad she had loved so long; she must dispose herself to the thought of spending her life with him. She tried to believe she must

be in a state of bliss; she knew she could not endure a separation now. And yet there were voices that whispered low down in her heart that in a passionate moment she had cut her old life away, and that there lay before her an unknown, untrodden path. And it seemed as if even he must be feeling constraint as well; he appeared absorbed, and he did not speak to her.

They had decided rapidly what to do during those first few moments, whilst they still sat beneath the tree with the sunset clouds above; or, rather, Geoff had decided, with his habitual promptness, talking rapidly over all his plans to her. They had money enough, plenty of money, but they must be careful still, and for a while, at least, save all they could. If they were to start now, and walk on through half the night, they would reach a station at a more distant town than the one they knew, from which a cheaper journey to London could be made; and, if they started from there, they would be less likely to be pursued, and then, when they got to London, they could settle what to do. He spoke, and Liz listened to him and silently agreed, sitting by his side on the grass, with her hands folded on her lap. From the moment when, by her silence,

she had agreed to what he said, there had come a very great change, a great quietness, over her. As soon as his arms relaxed she had released herself from him, and though he still held her hands for a while they lay motionless in his grasp. And then, when he let them go, she had put up her fallen hair, and arranged her hat; and then, seated quietly by his side, had listened silently to him. And yet, though she scarcely moved, and though she did not speak to him, her manner was not that of one who hesitates or retracts; it had the intense quietness that comes with a formed resolve. Of the passionate, weeping mood in which she had thrown herself on his breast there seemed now no traces left; no doubt the reaction from that had already come to her. And, perhaps, although she was determined, and although she did not repent, there was something in her that trembled at the path she had chosen now.

"They may follow after us—they may get me," she said at last.

"If they do they'll not get you," replied Geoff, and she said no more.

He rose from the ground, and she followed after him; it was for her to follow his move-

ments now. Only when they had gone a few steps she suddenly touched his arm. They both stood still, and he turned and looked down on her. Liz took hold of his arm then with both her hands ; there was the sound of a terrible effort in the faint tones of her voice.

"Geoff, I've been brought up honest—you'll remember that ?" she said ; it was the last despairing appeal of her womanhood that spoke.

He took both her hands without speaking, and kissed her brow. In that moment Liz felt that she had given herself to him. They said no more words to each other, but went on side by side. It was a familiar road to them, that lane within which they walked ; they had been with each other at sunset-time before. They walked quickly onwards in fear of being pursued ; and presently they turned into a less familiar lane, but Liz would not look back toward the chimneys of her home. They went on walking in the summer evening light ; the road was becoming unknown to her, like a stranger's face. The colours in the sky faded, the first stars came out above. Geoff led the way across some fields and stiles to the lane he wished to reach ; his instinct of locality was keen, and she silently

followed him. The moon was rising when they reached it at last.

And now they were there, walking onwards in the moonlight, in the light that threw the shadows of the trees across the road. They seemed to have been there a long while; it was a strange time—strange dream. Liz kept telling herself that it would last, that she would not wake. She had a foolish feeling, that kept always pricking her, that she had not looked back once towards the chimneys of her home. She kept feeling as if she ought to go back and do so now, as if the separation would not be complete unless she did. Oh, what would they be saying and thinking now of her? They would be "awful mad" with her, of course they would. And Jim, who pretended to be so good, he'd talk of her. And poor little Will; who 'ud finish his nightgown now?

"I could make 'em so nice," thought poor Liz, as her eyes filled with tears; "they won't let him have 'em so nice now I have gone. They won't let him have 'em white now, like a gentleman's son, not once agen. I *should* like to be able to do stitching still for him. If Geoff is good to me, and we do well, maybe little Willy can come to live

with us. Oh, if I didn't feel so strange, so strange! Geoff," she said, suddenly, "will ye wait awhile?" and she began to feel in her pocket as he stood still. After a few moments she drew out what she sought, a little needlecase that had been her mother's present once. One of the buttons of his ragged jacket was nearly off; she threaded her needle by the moonlight, and sewed it on for him, touching both it and his jacket in such tender fashion as a woman can give when her touches are her caress. "Ye do look untidy," she said; "ye want me to sew for ye."

It was the happiest moment she had known since she had left. He only smiled soberly at her, and made no reply.

But as the girl walked on by him in the moonlight her mind was busy, and numberless expectations and plans flitted through her brain, which, in spite of her vague presentiments and of sadness too, was beginning to be possessed with a woman's hopes once more. She would be so good to Geoff, and would do so much for him; he'd never imagine how much she could do. She would work so hard—she had never loved work, poor Liz—she 'ud keep his home

like a lady's home for him. She began to have visions of stitches and of dinners, of learning to sew and cook as she had never done before, of the thousand little cares and anxieties that a woman's love can make. And then it seemed natural that she should just take his arm; but he gave no answering pressure as he walked on by her side. A terrible, passionate sob rose in her breast. She stood still desperately, and raised her face to him.

"Geoff, let me kiss you," she whispered, in choking tones; and he bent his head, and she clasped him round the neck.

In that instant she could feel his gasping breathing, a short, quick sobbing like that of a wounded animal; and, alarmed at his excitement, she relaxed her clasp, and, taking his hands, she bent her face to them. He looked down on her, and then stooped, and kissed her softly; and, taking her hand, he went on as before. But their eyes had met; she was feeling more happy now. She had no means of knowing the sense of desperate conflict, the half-stifled anguish that kept rising in his heart, like words of a dim remorse or a scarcely conscious fear: "They were good to me once as no one else's been good, an'

I've marked Jim for life, an' hurt little Willy too; an', as if that wasn't eno', I'm goin' to ruin Liz." The words kept repeating themselves over in his mind; they produced there no sense of repentance and no thought of change, but still they lingered, and he could not feel at rest. It did not matter, he would keep her with him now. And still they kept walking onwards in the night.

"Ah! there's the inn," cried Geoff, speaking aloud at last, as with a turn of the road a point of light shone afar.

Liz heard with a relief that raised her sinking heart, and tried to rouse herself to walk with more vigour now. She was not used to such walking, country girl though she was, and her limbs seemed to sink with the weariness she felt. It appeared still a long way off, she was afraid that she might drop. And yet she longed to withdraw her hand from Geoff; his touch seemed to burn and throb in her till she could have cried with pain. If she could only reach the inn!—that would be some rest at last.

The inn was a small place, but bright with lights and people; it appeared that several travellers were staying there for the night. These were all in the kitchen, but there was

a sitting-room ; and Liz, who had sunk down on a seat by the kitchen door, was soon escorted there ; the landlord going before her with a light, whilst Geoff followed her with her hat hanging from his arm. They had to go through the kitchen to reach the further door, and the eyes of all the travellers were turned on them. For one instant Liz saw them as she passed through the room—the short man on a stool who was smoking by the fire ; the two young fishermen with their rods and bags ; the man who looked like a preacher sitting by the table ; and another man on the table, balancing his pipe upon his chin. The room was heavy with smoke, the great fire roared in the chimney ; she felt all the eyes on her. And then she was left in the sitting-room on the other side of the passage, and she leant down her head on the table there and cried.

But Geoff had returned to the kitchen, being more eager for society, and he found that his presence there seemed to be eagerly desired, for the appearance of the two young wayfarers had attracted great attention, and during the moments of his absence there had been surmises on them. In spite of his ragged clothes, therefore, they made room

at once for him. He sat down on the table by the man with the stubbly beard, and balanced the pipe on his own chin, and laughed; he was in an agitated condition, and his dark eyes flashed like light. The handsome, excited lad gave diversion to the rest; they were pleased with his quickness and beauty, and made ready sport with him. Only the "methody parson," who was distinguished by shabbiness, observed him narrowly, but did not attempt to speak. He was a seedy-looking fellow, dark and sombre, in a coat of rusty black, and he drank rather more deeply than a parson should. Geoff became disconcerted by his fixed gaze at last; he had himself been drinking more than was good for him, and had found difficulty in parrying the questions of the rest. He flung himself from the table, therefore, and declared that he must be going.

"Why, surely, mate," cried the man on the table, "ye be not goin' on so late."

"I must be in Lon'on before the morn," said Geoff.

"An' that young 'oman, be she a goin' wi' ye?"

Geoff pretended not to hear; he stood leaning against the shutter, and with a sudden,

excited movement he flung the shutters wide. The moon was beginning to wane, and looked straight into the room.

"Look there," cried Geoff to the others, "there's an eye looks in on us."

"That is the eye o' God upon evil deeds, young man." It was the parson who spoke, in a deep, sonorous voice ; and for one single instant there was silence in the room. Then laughter broke out, and whooping, and Geoff clapped the shutters to; and the parson settled down to his draughts of beer again, and Geoff flung himself down by the table, and drank with him. And when he had finished his draught he went to seek for Liz. A few minutes later the revellers looked up once more, as the two young travellers crossed the room again. The girl's broad hat shaded her face from view, and she kept very close to her companion's side : the lad had taken her hand in a protecting way. So they crossed the room whilst the others stared at them ; the doors closed behind them, and they went out into the night.

They were not alone, there was one who had gone before, a woman who had been crouching in the passage when they came in. She stood in the light from the open front

door which streamed out upon the road, a tawdry figure wrapped in a faded shawl; and as the companions passed by she laid her hand on Geoff. He turned round and looked at her; she had hollow eyes, and sunken cheeks on which were remains of paint.

"Gi' me a penny, master, I be goin' your road," she said, "the road on which ye be takin' the girl ye've got wi' ye."

Her wild laugh made Liz turn with a shudder, though she had not heard the words; and Geoff flung a penny behind him, and led her on. But the woman ran out into the moonlight, and got before them again.

"Ye may gi' me another penny, for I go my road alone."

"What does she mean?" asked Liz of her companion; but he would not answer, and only led her on. There was some enclosed ground in front of the inn, and a gate with a lamp above; by the light that gave she could see his face was pale. But she could not be aware of the conflict and anguish in his heart, of his sense of invisible hands stretched out to thrust him back. It did not matter, he would go on with her. They left the gate behind them, and went walking along the

path, with the shadows of trees across, and the waning moon above.

Oh, it was London that lay before them with all its light and splendour, the great, wonderful city whose sights she had longed to see. She could hear in her ears already the tread of crowds, she felt the uplifting of excitement she had never known before. And Geoff, he was conscious as she was of thoughts like these, but they could not prevail over the oppression that almost stifled him; whilst the great moon from above seemed to watch him ceaselessly, the eye that looks down on the evil deeds of men.

Oh, if it were darkness, dark, and he could take her in his arms; he dared not touch her with the moon looking down above, he dared not kiss her or say tender words to her. The cold night air seemed oppressive as deadly heat, the oppression at his heart was making it hard to breathe. It seemed to him as if a hand were upon his breast, a heavy hand like a repelling weight on him, so that every movement was against some restraining force. The trees seemed to watch him, the shadows, the oppression increased every instant that he walked, the night time appeared to be waiting for some decision to come from him.

It is in such moments that souls are lost or saved.

"Have we a long bit to go yet, Geoff?" asked Liz.

"Yes, wait an instant," he muttered below his breath. They stood still, leaning against a tree that stood out from the hedge. His arm was round her, and for a long while he would not move; and then all at once he began to walk quickly, dragging her on with him; and then again stood still. He stood for a while without speaking, breathing hard; some terrible conflict seemed in him; at last he moved again. His voice came in softer tones, and he gently took her hand.

"We'll get to the turning, Liz, then we'll see the town," he said. His hand held hers softly, and he moved quietly onwards now. They reached the turning, a corner in the road, and could see, far beyond them now, the pale glare of the town. There was a gate close to the path there, near a tree. He stood leaning against that; he had let go of her hand.

"Liz, I want to speak to you; I have a word to say," he said. His voice was in a whisper, but it did not tremble now. A branch of the tree above had pushed the cap from his head,

she could see his face in the pale light of the moon.

"Liz, I have made up my mind. I'm going to leave ye here." The words were still in a whisper, as if he could not raise his voice. And she stood still in front of him, as if she had been turned to stone.

"I know that I'm bad, bad eno'; I always was," said Geoff: "but I won't be so wicked; I can't be as bad as that. I can't do it, I can't," sobbing passionately; "it 'ud be too bad in me. I've been o' the same road ever sin' I was born, but I won't take you along it —I'll go my road alone."

Still silence; still the girl remained standing in the moonlight looking up at him. There was no word or movement from her; she looked up in his face. His words came in accents that were more broken now.

"I've give ye my money, I have . . . in those minutes i' the inn . . . ye'll be able to get back easy to the farm. . . . An' ye may tell 'em, ye may, ye've broke wi' me at last. . . . I've hurt Jim an' Will, but I'll do none hurt to ye."

Again after a moment, as if he could bear no more: "An I canna' stan' it, Liz, I'll just turn my back an' go. I'll go back to Ben,

there's nothing else for me." He made a movement, as if he would do what he said; and in an instant, with a cry, she had flung herself on his arm.

"Geoff! Geoff!" the sound of the wail rang far out down the road; she was clinging desperately to him with all her strength. "Ye won't go for to leave me now, Geoff, after all. Ye won't take me fro' my home an' my father to leave me alone, not after ye've chosen me, an' I've loved ye an' all. Ye shan't do it, I wonna leave ye; I'll stay wi' ye thro' all."

With the instinct of a woman she pushed back her hat, so that he looked down into the dark beauty of her tear-filled eyes; her straining hands held his arm with an iron grasp. He did not move or speak, only shivered and looked at her. They stood alone together in the stillness of the night.

"Ye won't be so bad to me, so wicked, Geoff," cried Liz, "not arter ye've promised to marry me, an' be good to me. Ye won't leave me to my shame, 'cause I've tried to care for ye. I shanna part fro' ye; we'll go on together now."

There was an instant's silence, and again she heard his voice; it was so low this time that it scarcely moved his lips.

"Ye wonna force me to use my strength o' ye, Liz?" he said.

"No, no; but ye'll marry me, Geoff—ye'll marry me, Geoff?" she cried. There was the despairing passion in the cry of a last appeal.

"An' if I did marry ye," he burst out with violence now, "what good'll that ever do to ye or me? It's misery, the misery of the torment; I'll go to the fire by mysel'; I wonna take ye wi' me. Get ye off fro' me now, I canna bear the touch."

He wrenched her hands from his arm, and flung her into the road. There was a moment's intense silence, they neither moved nor spoke. And then, with a sudden movement, Geoff laid hold of her once more, and strained her to his heart with the full strength of his arms; and then, clutching her face with his hands, kissed her hair, her eyes, her face, her lips, her neck, and, pushing her passionately from him, rushed off into the night. She could hear his footsteps, his rapid footsteps; she was alone.

And afterwards she remembered that she made two bewildered movements, and then stood still, shuddering, with her hands before her eyes. It seemed as if it was all a dream;

she must wake in her bed at home at last. She stood for a long while thus; she dared not move or think. And then, as her fingers dropped, it all rose before her at once; she was alone in the lonely road, in the night-time, a long way from her home. She tried to move, and then fell on her knees and sobbed.

CHAPTER X.

THE BACKWARD JOURNEY.

"THE night is dark, and I am far from home;" those words, so pathetic, and so universal in their pathos, can be true enough of each one of us at times. Long, long years afterwards, when much had come and gone, that one terrible dream of a night remained still in all its force upon the mind of Liz, as if there had been but one night for her in all her life. The moonlight would be gleaming, the lights of the inn would shine, she would hear again in her ears the voice of Geoff; and then all the lights would fail round her, and she would be alone, alone in the lonely night-time, crying out for the help of God.

Less distinct were those other moments when she dared to move at last, when she

found her way by the hedge in the darkness before the dawn, wringing her hands and sobbing and not recking where she went, cursing passionately sometimes the love that had brought her to shame like this. In the darkness of the night she seemed to hear his footsteps near her ; she stopped sometimes and started as if his touch were close—but there was no word that came ; in the night-time she was alone—alone with streaming eyes—in the darkness, without a friend.

And then there broke, far beyond her, the pale light of the dawn ; and then rosy clouds floated above her head, and she could see in front of her the chimneys of the town. In the stillness of that hour there were no carts on the road, and yet she became afraid of being seen, afraid of her disordered hair and the dust upon her dress, of the forsaken look that she felt on her from head to foot. And still she went on walking, not knowing where she went. And then a cart passed her, with empty sacks inside, and the driver called to her and offered her a lift ; and at first she refused, and then felt she could walk no more. And he helped her inside in a rough, good-natured way ; and thus, seated amongst the sacks, she was driven to the town.

And then she was wandering about amongst the streets, with the light and the mists of morning upon the roofs and roads; still wandering and troubled, and not knowing where to go. She thought of offering herself as a servant in the town, but she was faint and tired, and could not bear the thought of questions—and the farm was a long way off—she felt ready to drop and die.

And then she was out upon the country roads again, without having slept, or rested, or tasted food; she had eaten nothing since those moments in the inn. A terrible restlessness was upon her; she could not be still, and yet she could not decide what to do or where to go. Only with some confused instinct, for she had no power to think, she vaguely believed she had turned towards her home. And then there came by a man with a piebald pony in a little cart that was painted red and grey, and he begged her to get up there and sit with him, and she was too worn out to refuse him when he asked. He was going to a town that was not the town she knew, but that was not by a long way distant from the farm; and, though she dared not think of returning to her home, it seemed to her that she must get there and rest. She

sat by his side ; her head was tired and faint ; and he kept on talking and talking all the while. He told her that his wife had been dead just two years agone, and that he had bought the pony when she died. He said that the pony was a rare one to go, and that he had called it Jane because his wife was dead, and that he truly believed it had been in a circus once, and that he had two childer now, a girl and a boy, and the lad was just beginning to earn money, so he was. . . . He kept on talking, and talking . . . and she was tired, so tired . . . and the summer sky was blue above the piebald pony's head. . . .

CHAPTER XI.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

THAT evening the long table in the farm-house kitchen was laid out for tea with more than usual care. There was a large cake in the centre, with a dish of roses too; there were butter and cream of the newest, and fresh eggs boiled and poached; and there were strawberries in a glass dish, heaped up upon their leaves. Everything had a festive appearance: Liz was coming home that night.

"I hope as she'll like what's here," said poor Mrs. Gibson, "that I do. I don't want for her to feel as we're angered with her still."

"She can't feel that," replied Jim; "don't you trouble over that."

Yet Jim himself had a troubled, anxious

look; there was nothing festive in his expression then. He had gone with a sore heart to his morning's work that day; and, although he had found relief on his return, there was a burden of anxiety still upon his mind. Only he could not tell that to his mother, who was in want of relief herself.

Not one at the farm liked to remember what the last night had been, the delirious anxiety of it, the unrest, the want of sleep—to remember how Farmer Gibson had wandered up and down, how Mrs. Gibson had wept, and how Jim had kept by her side. There was a sorer anxiety on all than the loss of Will, though his disappearance had made some stir at first, a deeper trouble than the mere absence of Liz could cause; there was resting on all the burden of a possible disgrace. For Jim had whispered to the father and mother, when he was alone with them, that a labourer had seen two figures together in the evening gloom, and that from the description they seemed to be Liz and Geoff.

Heavily rose the next morning upon the wretched farm, though it was as fair a summer day as eyes could wish to see; heavily Jim departed in the morning for his

work, with his eyes tired and sore from what had been a sleepless night; gloomily the two who remained tried in vain to sit down and eat. Before the morning was over, indeed, a message from Crasten arrived, which told that Will was safe in the Crasten dressmaker's care; but it was not till noon had passed that a more important message came. It was brought by a boy from a town some miles away; it contained a few words only, but they were in the hand of Liz.

"Did I fright you very much, mother, when I never came back last night? I am staying here for a bit, but I will be back for tea." Mrs. Gibson read the words; and then sat down, and cried and sobbed. She showed them to her husband, who was silent and deeply moved; and then to old Molly, who loudly expressed her joy; and the farm-labourers heard of it, and they were relieved and glad. For a while the general feeling could be only of relief. She was coming back—she had not meant to stay away—it had never been in her mind to leave her home. There were only two who knew the story that Jim had heard, and that seemed to belong to the night, they would not think of it now.

By the time the afternoon came more sober thoughts prevailed, and Jim returned to find quietness in the house. For all were beginning to long for the wanderer to return; the strain of waiting was becoming too great for them. The farmer walked about restlessly, and talked of going out that night; and Mrs. Gibson kept setting the house in order, as if some distinguished stranger were being expected there. Jim was not restless, he was very quiet; he had expressed his joy when first he heard the news, and after that had become more quiet still. It was not till the evening was drawing near that at length he spoke.

"Mother," he said, "I'll go look after Will." He laid his hand on his mother's arm to stop her; she was moving restlessly with a duster in her hand. His words did not seem to please her; she stood still at once.

"Why, Jim, you'll never be goin' to leave the house to-night!"

"An' why not, mother? I do no good at home. The lad'll be thinkin' ye don't want him to come back."

"He's allays i' trouble now," the mother said; "but Liz 'ud perhaps be likin' to see

him when she come." It was touching to see that her daughter was always in her mind. Jim replied gravely, with some meaning in his tone —

"I'll tell him to come to-morrow; ye'll be best alone the night." But at this Mrs. Gibson broke out into tears and sobs, her pent-up excitement finding a vent at last. "They none of 'em cared as she did, they'd be all of 'em away; and she did want . . . Liz to think . . ." The sobs came too fast for words.

"Come, never ye mind, mother; she'll think it fast enough. Keep father at home to see her, that'll be eno' for her. I'll be comin' later on, I be forced to be goin' now." He did not tell her what forced him, but got his hat and went; an inward compulsion was upon him, and he dared not stay. He went out by the back-way, and stole along the fields, without raising his eyes that he might look down the road.

"I can't help it—I canna stay, I would stay if I could; I canna be in the house when she comes in this night. She've met Geoff sure eno', there's no denyin' that; an' she'll happen more easy speak if I'm not near—alone i' the house wi' but father an' mother

by. I can't look her i' the face wi' such thoughts in my heart. But I'll stan' by her, I will, whatever's come an' gone. If he have shamed and deserted her, I'll stan' by her all the same: I'll be her brother, whatever folks may say. The curse of God 'll be on him, an' is upon him now; it was an evil day for us when we first set eyes on him."

So he thought as he strode along whilst the evening shadows fell; and, meanwhile, in the kitchen at the farm Mrs. Gibson prepared the tea, with such tender arrangement of dainties as we have already seen, for it was her wish to make all things glad that night. Already she had been to her daughter's room, and had set things in order there; had arranged, and dusted, and had smoothed down the bed, the bed in which no one had slept the night before. She had even remembered to fill a jar with roses, because Liz had "allays been such a girl for flowers." And then she had come down, and argued with her husband, and had prevailed on him to stay in the house for tea, although it had been his wish to remain outside. For, in spite of the violent anger in which he had lived for months, Farmer Gibson was a loving man, and could be a chivalrous one too; he had struck and

suspected his daughter, and he was ashamed to meet her now. His wife's finer tact, however, prevailed on him; she was determined to take advantage of this tenderness of heart. Oh, surely it was better not to let the moment pass, far better that father and daughter should meet at once.

But as the evening drew on she became very silent too. The preparations had all been made, the table spread; in the succeeding stillness there came more time for fear. She got her knitting and sat down by the table; her heart was beating fast. The farmer in his arm-chair on the hearth seemed lost in thought; he remained entirely motionless, without turning his head to her. The doors and windows were wide open, for the summer night was hot; every faintest sound could be heard without the house. And then one of the farm-boys came inside with hasty steps.

"Oh, master, Miss Liz be a-comin' down the lane."

Mrs. Gibson dropped her knitting on her knee; it was the only sign she gave. She sat motionless, without moving head or eyes; the farmer remained in his attitude in his chair. And so, through the stillness, the daughter's footsteps came. . . .

Liz came in quickly, and opened the door, and shut it, and came hastily inside; and, taking off her hat, swung it carelessly in her hand, and then pulled out a chair from the table, and threw herself down on that. To the most casual observer there must have seemed something defiant in her manner, as of one who is not sure of the position that she holds; her face looked tired and flushed, and there were dark lines round her eyes. Her dress, too, had assumed an ill-arranged, dusty look; and her dark masses of hair were disordered by her walk; there was something forlorn in her appearance, defiant as it seemed. But Mrs. Gibson could only feel that she had her child again.

"I've come back in time for tea—you expected me?" said Liz. Her voice had the high, strained tone that comes from excited feeling; and she took out her handkerchief as she spoke and fanned herself.

"Yes, dear, yes; you're in nice time," the mother murmured. She felt a longing to take her treasure in her arms. "You'll be wanting your tea; that is, if you've walked from Scoth."

"I walked, of course; how else could I come?" asked Liz, with a weary impatience

that was not all fatigue. They were beginning to press like torments, these first moments in her home; she had not imagined that she would mind them so much.

"Then you'll be tired, dear, you must be," the mother said. "Just sit down at once, as you are, and have your tea."

As she spoke her eyes rested upon her daughter's raiment, which had a forlorn, ill-arranged look, as has been said. Liz felt them upon her with a feeling too deep for words; the tenderness with which she had been addressed had pierced her heart.

"Where's Will?" she asked, in a trembling voice, as she rose, "and Jim?"

"Will's away with Miss Harte for a bit," the mother said, "an' Jim have gone over to Crasten to see 'em both. But your father's here, in the arm-chair, as you see."

Liz had seen him, indeed, from her entrance into the room; but she turned her head very slightly towards him now. And, accepting even that slight intimation, the farmer rose. He came up to her, though he kept his face turned away, and laid his great hand on her shoulder to keep her where she was.

"I'm right glad to see thee, my girl—my girl," he said.

There was something pathetic enough in the trembling of his voice, the strong voice that had never been used to tremble so. Liz kept her face averted, but her eyes were full of tears. They stood so, without moving, father and daughter, whilst nearly a minute passed.

"If I've done bad to thee, Liz," the farmer muttered, "if I've made thee feel as thee'd like to be away . . . thee musn't think bad o' me, or lay't to heart too much. . . . I won't even speak o' him, though I hate him sore, if it's so as'll give thee a bit more peace, my girl. . . . Ye bear for a bit wi' us, an' we'll bear wi' thee. . . . An' now let us sit down together, an' be at peace."

Liz could not answer, for she was crying fast; but she got rid of her tears with her fingers, and turned away, and sat down. She had not looked towards her father; he thought she was hurt with him still, and that gave him a gentleness he might not else have had. He sat down to the table, and pushed the cake to her, and made little jokes on the best roses being picked, and advised Liz to take one and put it in her hair. And meanwhile Mrs. Gibson anxiously poured out the tea, and said, "My dear, you like cream, I know; here's the

best to-night for you." Liz did not answer, it seemed that she could not speak; and they all sat silent together, and tried in vain to eat.

Oh! how strange it was to be sitting with roses and cake so near, in the old familiar kitchen, with father and mother there. Last night . . . the moonlight . . . it seemed already like a dream; and yet it was already as if years and years had passed. Oh! was it true that she was already older, years and years older, a passionate girl no more? She would never love anyone, she could not love again. Her bones were aching with weariness, her head felt tired and sore; it was scarcely possible to rouse herself to eat. If they knew she had been with Geoff they could not be kind to her. But they were being good; oh! they were being good to-night.

That feeling grew fast upon her when tea was ended, and she was placed at once in her mother's chair, her father saying that he saw she was tired. It was a large wooden chair, and the cushions of it were soft; it could not but be pleasant to sink in them and rest. She lay watching dreamily her mother's movements as she went round the

table clearing the things away; she was so entirely tired that she could not raise her head, yet she dared not close her eyes, for she saw the moonlight then. Oh! how pleasant and quiet, how *safe* it was at home, how much affection there was, what familiar ways! And yet she had been ready to throw these things away, to barter the father's love, the mother's love, for a few passionate kisses, and a mad, delirious dream. . . . She shuddered inwardly as she thought of the touch of Geoff, of the life that would have lain before her if she had been linked to him, the wretched life to which no relief could come, the life of unutterable misery, if not even a life of shame. Oh! she would never tell them, never; she would keep it all concealed, she would go through life always with the thought of that peril in her heart. She would go away from them now, go upstairs to her room. And yet she could not — too wretched and tired to move.

Mrs. Gibson was pausing near her now that her work was done; the farmer had seated himself on the other side of the hearth; she felt their eyes upon her like a torment she could not bear. With an effort at last she raised herself from her seat; the pain in her

head was so great she could have cried when she moved.

"I think I'll go an' lie down," she muttered, wearily.

Her mother replied at once, looking at her with anxious eyes —

"Do, dear; you'll be wanting a good long rest to-night."

"She looks a bit pale an' tired," the farmer said; "she wants a good sleep to get her flowers back. Do, mother, give Liz the roses round the cake."

"I've put some in her room a'ready," the mother said.

Liz had moved on a step; but, hearing this, she stood still. She could not tell what it was that surged suddenly in her. Roses—roses for her—waiting for her in her room. With a sudden and violent movement she turned round and back at once; she threw herself down before where her father and mother sat, and with a passionate impulse flung her arms across their knees.

"Father, father an' mother, don't think too much o' me. I'm a bad, wicked girl; I wanted to leave my home. An' he's give me up, he has, and I've none left but ye!"

CHAPTER XII.

WILL IN REFUGE WITH ELIZABETH.

THAT night Elizabeth Harte's lamp was shining brightly, and she sat at her work with little Will by her side. And unquestionably the little room seemed different, brighter; the presence of the visitor made a change in the place. Elizabeth bent still over the black work that was the "mourning order," and her eyes were tired with the labour as they had been before. But Will by her side was bright, and not fatigued, though a little pale still from the effects of last night's escape; and as she went on sewing he kept making his childish comments, or bestowing his artless confidences, as children do. They made a strange pair together, the dressmaker and the boy; the thin, worn young woman, with

her tightly strained yellow hair and nervous face; and the little, delicate boy, with eyes alight with intelligence, and with shy affection too. For Will had a ready affection still for all he met, only he was more reserved in manner than before.

Elizabeth had been much distressed over him the previous night, when in such unexpected fashion she found him at her door. For the child himself, indeed, it was easy to provide—a blanket, a bed on the sofa, some hot tea, and caresses supplied his wants; and, though surprised at his exhaustion, she had little fear for him. She feared for the home that had lost him, and must be anxious over him; the thought of the mother's distress almost distracted her, and she would have liked to send to her a messenger at once. But the farm lay miles away, and it was the middle of the night; she was herself worn out with work, and could not leave Will alone, and in her lonely establishment there was no one else to send. So she contented herself with cares for the little lad; and when she had soothed and kissed him, and laid him down to rest, she slept herself in the chair near him all the night. For the vagrant lad whom she sheltered once had escaped, and

there were haunting fears upon her for this visitor as well. She need not have troubled herself, Will had no thought of flight.

In the early morning she found a messenger, a rough lad, who happened to be going near the farm, and she charged him anxiously with the message he was to give. Relieved on this account, she could set her room in order, could watch Will wake—it was pretty to see him wake—and could get breakfast ready for him and for herself. After that she determined not to stir from the house all day, that she might not lose sight of her charge till she felt that he was safe.

A needless anxiety again! Will had no thought of giving trouble, but was as submissive as a well-trained little dog could be. He insisted on helping her to clear up the breakfast things; he brushed up the grate, and made things tidy there; and picked up her scissors instantly when they fell. When she began to work he seated himself by her side, and threaded a number of needles without being asked, because "mother, she allays liked him to do like that." But she observed that he turned very pale when he mentioned his mother's name, and she did not venture to speak to him of his home.

A little delicate creature he seemed, so bright and fair, an elfin visitor in that narrow, lonely house. Elizabeth, always shy, and always reserved as well, had not found herself at all times able to draw children to her side. But Will's ready affection was like a perpetual fount; there was little need ever to attempt to draw him out. He sat now by her side in the evening, delighted to be there, prepared to be silent or ready to make remarks, to thread her needles or hand to her scissors and tape, or tell her scraps of history from the old books at home, of the "big ships that came to take England once on a time," or the "Spartan people what did whip their little boys."

Elizabeth let him talk without herself saying much; she was hoping always that he would speak to her of his home.

"And now I will tell you a pretty tale," said Will; "I know ever such lots of stories, and I talk them to myself. Shall I tell you a story I have made up myself?"

"Do, dear," replied Elizabeth; "that will be very fine." She was stitching all the time, for she could not leave off her work. "I have heard you once tell a story to yourself upon a wall."

"But this will be nicer," Will said, "much nicerer than that. That was a stupid story; it was all about me, you know. This is all about—a river—" and here he stopped, for the story did not seem inclined to produce itself at once.

"It was a very nice river," Will said; "it kept the sunlight so. You know when you see a river it looks all nice and bright, and then, when you come agen, it may be quite black an' dull. But this one river it kept the sunlight always, so as it was allays bright, even when it was night; and the daughter of the king she came to see it one day; and she bathed her face inside, and her face got the sunlight too. Oh! I ought to have told you," said Will, "that she wasn't glad at home. Her father was bad, like as fathers are in books, and he'd actually told her she must never come back no more. But then, when he heard she'd the sunlight, he was sorry he was bad, and he sent for to tell her she might come back that day; and the court'ers all came to meet her outside the palace doors, and they brought her inside, and they all of 'em felt quite glad; an' then afterwards they—they didn't—" he waited a moment here. "An' they didn't

never need to have umbrellas when it rained! That is the story; it's a nice one, isn't it?"

He looked up at Elizabeth to see if she were pleased.

"It's a very nice one, Will. Will you tell your mother that?"

"I don't know," said Will, shaking his head. "I don't often tell her them. An' besides," remembering himself, "I'm not goin' back home no more."

He looked up at Elizabeth again, more doubtfully this time.

"Oh, how can you talk so, child? You are going home to-night."

Will continued looking up at her, as if struck with dismay, with his lower lip dropped, and with dilated eyes.

"Dear Willy, you want to see your mother, don't you?"

But Will only looked pale, and trembled and would not speak. His natural expression was so bright and quick that it seemed as if a light had been put out in his face.

Elizabeth, with her quick sympathy and strange experience of pain, felt touched to her heart to see such young distress. But she was always slow of speech; it was not easy to console.

"I like it so very much here," said Will, in plaintive tones; "I'd do all the work of the house if you'd only let me stay. And I'd give no trouble, an' always go straight to school. An' I can soon earn some money, Jim says hisself I can. An' father he'll kill me as soon as I get back."

"Oh, Will, you mustn't say that; it can't be true, you know. And it wouldn't be right in me to keep you from your home. You must do like your lady, get sunlight in your heart."

But Will paid no heed, absorbed in his sense of wrong.

"He's a bad, wicked man," he said, "to talk to me like that. If I knew where Geoff was I'd go and live with him; there isn't anyone I love as much as Geoff. An' Liz, she has gone away; I think I'll go to her—it was then I run away, as soon's they said she'd gone. I won't try to be good; there isn't no good in that. They don't love me at home; they don't care for me a bit; I have tried to be good, and it isn't no good at all. I'll never be happy again, now as no one cares for me."

His lips quivered, and his face was very pale, as if with a weight of distress that he had not strength to bear. It was pitiful to

see that expression on one so young; and Elizabeth, looking at him, felt the child's pain in her heart. Many words of reproof and of comfort rose almost to her lips—the obedience-lessons that we always teach the young, the story of One who was "subject" when He was once a child Himself. They only rose to her lips; she could not speak. With a little sigh she laid all her work aside; and went to an easy-chair on the hearth, and sat down there with her hands clasped and her arms spread upon her lap, and sitting in this attitude she looked silently at him. Her look seemed to draw him; he got up timidly, and with doubtful movements stole quietly to her side; and then climbed into the nest that her outspread arms had made. She felt he was crying quietly with his face hid on her arm; but she put her arms about him, and did not speak a word. His breathing came quietly, and more quietly, and then he slept.

The minutes passed on; she did not like to move. He was small and slight for his years, yet a heavy weight for her; her unfinished work lay upon the table near her, but she was still. The lamp was beginning to burn low for want of trimming—she looked

towards it, and still she did not move. Will's head lay against her shoulder; he was very fast asleep; she could hear his soft breathing as it came and went; it seemed to her that a very long while passed. And then through the stillness the sound of footsteps came. She could hear the gate shut, then a tap upon her door.

With a heavy heart had Jim passed beneath the trees. It was a dull and gloomy evening with no moonlight above, and there seemed to him little light within his heart. Through the whole of his long walk he had been thinking of his home, of his father's violent temper, and his sister's wild words and ways. The house was altered; there was little comfort there.

"The master be always asking me to come an' live i' town; I'm thinking that some o' these days I'll do it, too. I'll be making a home for myself; that'll happen be best for me. I'll maybe feel better when I am once away; an' I'll take little Will to be with me; he'll be like a child o' mine."

His hand was upon the door as he spoke. He opened it, and stood still.

Oh, it all rose before him so quietly, peacefully, the dressmaker's little room, with the

dim lamp on the table, the breadths of black stuff lying everywhere about, and the face of Elizabeth as she sat by the hearth. His little brother lay in her arms, asleep and resting there, with the remains still of recent tears upon his face; her arms were about him, protecting him, her earnest face above. . . .

"And there," said Jim to himself, "is the mother of the child."

With a glow upon his face he came quietly up to her. She would not rise, but she held out her hand to him; their eyes met each other, and as they met they smiled. And then Jim stooped all at once and kissed her face; and, even as he did so, little Will stirred and awoke.

* * * * *

Will thought it strange that Jim should be silent during their long walk home; he might have imagined his brother to be displeased with himself. But he had been assured that no one was angry with him; that was good.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SUMMER PASSES.

THE summer clouds floated softly above the earth, the Fens lay as an intense blue colour beneath the deep blue sky; the corn began burning like gold beneath the ripening sun. All around the farm the deep blue distance lay, with the yellow spaces of ripening corn between, and here and there a shadow from some trees, dark against the sky. The sheep fed and enjoyed themselves in the field behind the house; the red cows found every branch beneath which there could be shade; in front the prim little garden was very bright with flowers. The summer radiance and peace lay on every side of the home, and there was greater peace than there had been within its walls.

It was during that summer time that Jim learnt to love the roses; he had never paid much attention to any flowers before. But it was pleasant now in the evening to wander amongst the flowers, to pluck them with clumsy fingers that rather tore than picked, and then with his hands full to set out on his walk—the long walk that took him across the fields and lanes.

Oh, how lovely Crasten looked now in the summer-evening light, with the church spire rising above Mr. Audley's trees; how softly the smoke rose up from many cottage homes; how pleasantly the sounds of the evening's cricket came. With these things so near it was more easy to forget—to forget the long day's work and the thought of future toil—to forget his own scarred face, and the saddened look of home. Only he would not stay to play cricket as he had been used to do—he had often played with Geoff Haldan in Crasten parish once.

Sometimes he lingered beneath Mr. Audley's trees, for their shade was pleasant in the heat of the summer's day. There was no smoke now to be seen from the great white house beyond, the master of it had left his home at last. And apparently not too early, for there

were rumours about him, some vague reports of a secret whose nature none seemed to know, and a wonderful story of a dinner party into which a drunkard forced his way. He had gone away at last, there was no doubt about that ; and it was said that Miss Horley was to be married, and to come to Crasten soon—the pretty Miss Horley whom Hanorth and Crasten loved. Jim thought of these things as he lingered beneath the trees, and thought how the village people had chased Geoff Haldan there. The loveliness of the two parishes in their summer beauty had painful thoughts for him ; there was always some scene to remind him of the lad who had been his friend. Well, at least, and at any rate, there was some consolation too, the little room with its lamp, and Elizabeth at her work. He had never dared to ask her a certain question yet, but she would raise her eyes and would smile when he came in : he could forget his sister's face and that other face when she smiled. And then in the day-time there was foundry work to do.

He stood at his work all day in the foundry heat and draughts ; but away at the farm the summer breezes blew, and sent trembling ripples all down the ripening corn. And the

farmer was out all day looking after his fields and men; and Will, somewhat more gently treated, went to and from the school; and Liz kept quietly to her work at home. A silent presence, with a careworn, silent face, she stood at the wash-tub or churn with her sleeves rolled up her arms, her hands moving always, though her eyes looked far away. Her mother would watch her anxiously, but dared not often speak to her.

Will, coming each day from Hanorth, would bring back bits of news; but there were certain subjects on which he never spoke, though, sooner or later, they reached the farm at last. Men said that inquiries were being made after Geoff, that a man had written from London who seemed anxious about him, but that none knew anything of him in the place. The Wolf's Den was falling in ruins, and old Jem lived there alone; it was said he was dying, and had none to care for him, for his older sons were now scattered far and wide, and the youngest of the wolves had never returned again. Men talked of these things to each other, but none went near the place.

And yet it must have been dreary to lie in the Den alone, in the lonely house, in the

midst of the lonely waste, with no human help to support the last wrecks of an ill-spent life. At night the thick mists would gather on the waste, rolling up like phantom armies from out of the marshy ground, whilst the deserted windmill stood out from them like a spectre in the midst. The loneliness frightened people, and they dared not cross the ground; or if they ventured on part of it, crossed as little as they could. New terrors became invented, and old stories were revived; it was said a child's wailing was heard always on misty nights, a low, ceaseless crying that chilled the blood to hear. It was said that the wraith of Jem could be seen far from his home, going across the waste continually with a basket on his arm. These stories gave fresh alarm, and none cared to explore the place, or dared to approach the old man who lingered out his life alone. In the daytime a thread of smoke would rise where his cottage stood, the one sign to show that he must be living yet. And so the white mists kept rising from the marsh, and the waste was enveloped in darkness night after night, and none thought of going across it to give any human help, until a final calamity brought the human help at last. . . .

On that night Elizabeth Harte had been visiting at the farm, and was returning back to her home, across the waste. It was not her nearest way, though she was going back by Hanorth, but an irresistible attraction drew her to the place; she had been hearing about the old man and his loneliness that day, and the subject lay at her heart now that the night had come. She thought she might pass by the Wolf's Den as she went back to her home, and might possibly even venture to pause before the house, to look at the miserable hovel that she had never seen as yet, and listen by it to hear if the old man were at home. And yet she was frightened, and felt her heart beating faster; the old stories of his fierceness and lawlessness rose in her mind, and she was quite unprotected, and was entirely alone. It was nearly nightfall, too, though there were no stars to be seen; a thick grey mist had risen above the waste, and, unused to it as she was, she feared to lose her way. She went stumbling onwards, her feet sinking in the marsh; the darkness grew deeper, and she felt still more afraid. And then in the distance before her she saw a light.

In a few more minutes she discovered

whence it came; a hovel of some sort stood above the marsh, and from out of the open door of it came the light. This must be the Den, then, of which she had heard so much; it looked a miserable place in the darkness and the mist, with a few gaunt trees, like indistinct forms, above. There were voices, movements within, she did not know what to think. Without staying to consider further she went on to the door, and in an instant the scene that was before her held her eyes. For there on the ground, upon a shutter, lay a wounded man, with the men who had carried him in standing by his side; and at the further end of the room an old man lay. It is impossible to describe in words all the weirdness of the scene; the indistinct, motionless figure upon the bed, the candle on the floor which made strange shadows there, the light on the bloodstained bandages round the head of the wounded man. The wild shadows made all appear like the gloom of some nightmare dream. Yet it was no such uncommon scene, after all, upon which they fell.

Elizabeth entered, and spoke to the men who had been the bearers, and who were both of them glad and relieved to welcome possible

help in her. It appeared that they belonged to some distant village, and had been crossing the waste together when they discovered the wounded man, whom they recognized at once to be one of the sons of Jem. He lay near a rude hovel, where he had, perhaps, been sheltering, and he had been attacked or fighting, for there was a deep wound on his head; he was entirely unconscious, and could speak no word to them. They carried him into the hovel, but the roof of it was gone, and they dared not leave him unsheltered alone in the evening gloom; so they tore down a shutter at last and bore him to the Den. It appeared that they had felt most reluctant to enter it, being afraid; but they need not have feared, though old Jem was there alone; he lay on his bed on the corner, and seemed dying fast himself. The whole place looked more than wretched; they could find neither food nor drink, nor firing, nor medicine, nor coverings of any kind, excepting only the blanket in which the old man was wrapped, whilst an empty bottle lay beside his bed. The two men who had lent assistance were stalwart youths enough, but the horror of the whole place had been too much for them; they declared that they could

not remain with the dying men alone. Elizabeth implored them earnestly to go and fetch a doctor, and promised to watch by herself till they came back. They looked on her with wonder, but agreed to her wish at once—they would have offered to stay, but they felt "askeared," they said. Before she came in they had found a dip and matches; that one dirty tallow candle gave all the light there was. They put it upon the table, and lifted the wounded man, and laid him upon the settle that was on one side of the wall; and Elizabeth rolled her jacket into a pillow for his head. When these arrangements were made there was nothing more to be done. They promised to send a doctor as quickly as they could, and wished her a rough "good-night," and went out into the waste. She could hear their retreating footsteps; she was left to watch alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD WOLF LEAVES THE DEN.

THAT was not a watch to be forgotten, that night-time in the Den.

Elizabeth sat by the table with her head upon her hands, and her eyes on the end of tallow candle which gave all the light she had. At a little distance from her, against the wall, lay the wounded man ; she could hear his heavy breathing, but he did not move or stir. At the other end of the room was the bed where the old man lay. It had been placed across the doorway which led to the inner room, as if with the intention of guarding the entrance there ; but the young men had explored there already and found it bare, they said. Their movements had not been able to rouse the old man at all, even though

they had disturbed the bed on which he lay; he appeared to be past consciousness, and drifting on to death. Elizabeth could scarcely see him from her seat, she felt that she ought to rise and attempt to give some help, and yet the horror that was upon her held her still. The loneliness, the night-time, the desolation of the room, the sensation of being alone with these two wild, dying men, her only light a candle that might not last out the night—these things had a grasp of terror against which she had little power, there was a horror upon her pulses that seemed to tingle there. She had never before experienced such sensations of alarm; in those few first instants she could have cried out for fear.

Having overmastered herself to some degree, she rose and went round the room to see what she could do. With the candle in her hand she paused by the wounded man. He lay quite unconscious, and breathing in heavy groans; the bandages round his head were soaked and stiff with blood. She touched them with timid fingers, she gently took his hand; but he lay with his eyelids closed, beyond the sense of help, the heavy groans of his breathing never ceasing for an instant, though his face looked stiffened and his

hand was deadly cold. A wild, coarse face he had, on which a life's strange tales were written; the life would not wake from its stupor to a late repentance now. Still holding his hand, she sank upon her knees, and with oppression at her heart tried to breathe one prayer for him. Since her own strange experiences it had been hard to pray; it was scarcely more easy by the side of the dying man. . . . She rose at last, and went softly round the room; and, with the candle in her hand, paused by the other bed at last.

Old Jem lay there, wrapped in a dirty blanket, a more horrible sight even than his son. His eyes were open, but they seemed to look on nothing; his face was fearfully wasted, as if he had long been starving; and his breathing came always in a little babbling way, as if his breath tried perpetually to form itself into words. A limp, matted beard hung about his mouth and lips; it hung on a bloodless face, with a senile, wasted look, and the hand that lay on the counterpane was reduced almost to bones. And yet, senile as he appeared, in the last stage of age and want, there were fewer signs of coarseness on his features than on those of his son. Elizabeth stood holding the candle, and looking round the

room. Alas! what a miserable place! what a wretched home it seemed! what oaths had been here! what drunkenness! what low living! what profanity! what a home for animals it had been, rather than for men! And yet these were two human souls who were struggling here for life. If they had been animals it might have been best for them. . . . With a more passionate impulse than had been hers for many years, she fell down on the ground, and poured out her heart in prayer.

A little relieved, she raised herself at last, and went back near the table where she had been, and sat down there. She had placed the candle exactly in front of her; her elbows leant on the table, and her head was bent on her hands. The flickering candle made strange shadows on the wall; she could hear the night-wind sobbing outside the Den, and the heavy breathing was near her of the wounded man. It was all like some terrible dream—some nightmare in her brain. . . . She knew where she was all the time, and yet —and yet—

Oh! whence came that fancy of crowds and crowds of figures, moving always like phantoms before her on the wall? She could

see them still moving onwards, crowds and crowds, all wailing and wringing their hands, and holding up their arms as if entreating, and yet forced onwards towards the darkness. She kept trying to rouse herself from the fancy, and yet she could not; the night-wind outside wailed like voices in her ears; the phantom, despairing multitude moved always in her brain, where ends of remembered verse were ringing too; and then that seemed to form itself into despairing cries as well.

> "No light had we: for that we do repent;
> And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
> Too late, too late"—

With a start she roused herself, and stood up upon her feet. She was utterly exhausted, and the dreams were becoming real; she feared, if she yielded herself to them, that she might sleep. No; everything was as it had been in the room. The flickering candle made strange gleams on the wall; the groans of the wounded man were becoming fainter now. Elizabeth looked towards him, and thought his face more livid; there was coming slowly upon it the look of death. She covered her eyes with her hands that she might not see his face; and, as she did so, they seemed to rise once more—the old man, the young man,

the lad whom she had sheltered in her house, the despairing multitudes of the haunting, phantom crowd. Their cry seemed to raise itself now, and to ring within her ears.

> "Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
> O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!
> No, no, too late"—

She started up once more, and raised by that movement the head which had sunk upon her arms. Had she, indeed, been dreaming, and become awakened now? The flickering candle had almost burnt itself out; there was almost darkness, and there was silence in the room. She listened, but she could hear no faintest sound of breathing; a terrible silence seemed to possess the place. With a trembling hand, and shuddering, she raised the light. The wounded man's head had fallen backwards; he was dead. Trembling horribly, she turned towards the other bed once more.

And then—it is scarcely possible to describe what those next few moments were. The old man was becoming conscious; he had raised himself in bed; his eyes were open; he looked at her, and at the room. It was like seeing life in death to meet his eyes. Her knees were trembling so that she could scarcely

sit; she feared every instant that his glance would rest upon his son. With surprising strength he raised himself in the bed: he sat up there, with the blanket round him, a wasted figure; his eyes seemed to be searching for something they could not see. They looked round the room; they fell upon her, upon his son lying dead; they seemed unsatisfied, as if they were searching still. And then, all at once, with a piercing voice, he cried out, with the one last effort of his remaining strength —

"Where's Geoff—Geoff?"

The words rang like a cry. There was no answer; he fell back and died.

The candle flickered, and guttered, and raised itself again and again, and went out at last. Elizabeth was left alone, watching, in the darkness with the dead.

* * * * *

If those words, that cry of a parting spirit, could have reached beyond the Den, if they could have penetrated to the heart of another wretched, wasted life, a doom that lay yet unfulfilled might have been even then delayed. But in vain was it for the wanderer and vagabond that his old home cried out

for him; its miserable education alone was bearing harvest then.

Let us take up again the story we have deserted for awhile, and follow its track once more through the darkness to the end. For that passionate flight in the night-time had brought the wanderer no rest; its generous impulse had owned no sure resolve, and his restless, despairing footsteps had borne him back to ruin—a more certain ruin that yawned close before him now.

CHAPTER XV.

MORNING AND NIGHT.

A COLD, heavy rain was falling upon the streets, on which had gleamed the pale light of a September dawn. That light was obscured now by rushing streams of rain, an intense, heavy darkness had enveloped all the town; at that early hour there were but few men abroad, but those few had sought quickly all the shelter they could find. A little covered alley had become full of workmen; beneath a stone portico a dirty child had crouched; and two young women had retreated to a passage, and had thrown the upper skirts of their dresses above their heads. A black cat had got under an overturned basket, and was peering out from there. In some way or other, and with such quickness as

was possible, every animal, human or otherwise, was sheltering as it could.

And, indeed, there is something imposing in a real storm of rain, even in a Midland county, where such a thing is rarely known; the darkness of it, the torrents, the sense of rushing power, the reminder of mountain scenery where all such tempests thrive, these things can convey with them the sense of a mighty charm. And at that very early hour there were few sufferers abroad, and those who had been in the streets had found some shelter now.

There were two in the porch of a little church of the town, whose lighted windows made a pleasant glow in the gloom. Some early service was being conducted there, though no sound of an organ rolled forth to greet those who stood without; they could only hear the faint sound of the clergyman's voice in prayer. The waiters had climbed up the churchyard, which stood high, alarmed by the ominous darkness that gathered above their heads; and then beaten and lashed as they climbed by the first pelt of the rain. In the porch itself, where they were, was little shelter to be found, the driving rain made a rushing entrance there; they were both of

them pressed to the door to gain all the help they could. That door had been insecurely fastened, it stood ajar; and from the farther end of the church came the clergyman's voice to them. They did not attempt to enter, wish to enter, as it seemed; they had not the appearance of people who wish to go to church, though they had the look of people who have not spent the night in bed.

It is wonderful what impression a small scene makes sometimes; a little, trifling incident can abide with a man for life. On the mind of one of the two that scene remained impressed — the driving rain, the darkness, the danger and loneliness without, the feeling of warmth and comfort and of worship in the church, like some ark of refuge where those within were safe. He was a gentleman of fifty, who had never been fond of churches, who had never entered one since he was a child at school. It was strange how that old remembrance came back just now to him; perhaps because it was hard to take up the superior position now, standing now as an outcast at the church door itself, with the sound of the prayers just floating out to him, and the darkness without, and his companion's face at hand.

That companion's face, how distinctly it dwelt with him! A young face—the face of one still a lad—yet with haggard, wasted features, and dark eyes wild with an expression that appeared almost insane. A haunted spirit this, standing now without the church, kept without like the evil beings that haunt the spires. The gentleman looked at him, and a slight smile stirred his lips; they were speaking inwardly, although no sound came from them.

"*He* has not been brought up to go to church," they said.

And, as they said this, there came a gust of wind, a burst of the driving tempest in all its force on them. In an instant they seemed overwhelmed with rain and darkness, as if they could scarcely stand against the blast. It was almost impossible not to lean against the door; it gave way before them, and they stood within.

Oh! what a scene of peace, what calm and quiet were here! The lights shone in the chancel at the further end of the church; a row of worshippers knelt before the rails; the minister stood before them with the golden plate in his hand. And then in the church there were some who quietly rose, and prepared

themselves to come softly in their turn. The gentleman of whom we have spoken stood near the door with the lad. He felt that a sudden thrill passed through his companion's form; the lad almost moved, then as suddenly stood still. And then, with a sudden, startled movement, he turned round; and his eyes met those of his companion bent on him. Some words rose unconsciously to the lips of the older man, a dreamy quotation from a book lately read. At the instant he did not know he spoke aloud —

> "'What dost thou here at the Lord's Supper
> With thy body's sins?' said he."

The words had scarcely passed, had hardly stirred his lips, when he knew he had spoken them by his companion's face. They were enough; the boy cowered suddenly, and turned; and, leaving the church swiftly and silently, stole out into the storm. His companion followed him quickly, but could only find the rain—the darkness, and driving tempest that were upon the streets.

* * * * *

That short scene, slight as it was, remained vividly on his mind, but it was to be still more impressed there by what occurred that night.

That very same evening he saw the lad again.

He had himself been spending a well-considered day, a day of considerably more toil than he was wont to give; and, moreover, one of some decisions too. He had sat writing letters through the whole long afternoon, a very unusual sort of afternoon for him; until a burden of resolve had been lifted off his mind, and he felt satisfied with himself, and almost at rest. In the golden September evening he strolled out of doors again; he felt as if he deserved some leisure now. It was strange how that face of a boy remained always in his mind, but it was not very likely he would meet it in the streets. . . .

Before one of the houses there was a little crowd; a private carriage was waiting before the door, and the crowd was waiting to see who would come out. It was such a motley assemblage as may be readily supposed, consisting of nursemaids with perambulators, and of ragged boys, with a few young workmen and errand-lads as well. They were waiting there, and for an instant he also paused, with a slight curiosity for which he smiled at himself. The door of the house opened, and a young lady came down the steps, with a foot-

man in attendance, and a gentleman following behind. The light of the lamps, which had just been lit, shone on her head. She was in evening dress, of course, and all muffled in a cloak; but the light gleamed upon her fair hair and pretty face: the footman was holding the train of a dress of white, dazzling silk; and upon her wrist, which was lifted, a golden bracelet shone. And then, all at once, a lad who was standing next the gentleman gave a start, a half-smothered exclamation as of one seized with surprise; and, astonished at that, his companion turned round on him. And, as he did so, there seemed to rise before him the dark, driving rain, and the lights within the church—he saw these things as a vision before he knew that they had been recalled to him by his young companion's face.

Yes . . . it was the same face, the same strange face again — the pale and desperate face; yet more white and desperate now. But the lad was not paying the slightest heed to him; his eyes were fixed upon the young lady's form; there was a wild and hungry expression in their gaze, it appeared as if he recognized her, though he had not been prepared for her. And then, suddenly, he stepped forward, as if about to

speak. But he did not address her, or even attempt to speak, only with his hand he touched the train of her dress as she passed. It was a movement so slight that only one had seen, and as his companion turned to him he slipped back into the crowd. There was a stir amongst them as the carriage drove away—and the seeker was never able to gain a sight of him again.

Alas! poor despairing wretch, involved now in deepest toils, what real help could that instant give to you? What comfort the poor boy expected from it is hard indeed to say, yet at the moment it may have appeared like some sole last hope to him, like one last touch and glimpse of heaven in the darkness of his life. From the despairing purpose that had been growing in his heart he had been called by the voice of prayer, by the remembered face once more; but these had not turned him, he turned away from them. As his hand dropped from the white silk robe the darkness closed upon him, he went onwards with that sensation through the twilight on the streets.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEN HAS MISGIVINGS.

AND on the same evening Ben came too to N—. He came there by appointment that he might meet with Geoff.

It was about eight o'clock, and a dark night, when he came near the town. There were no stars, the night was enveloped in blackness; the outlines of trees were only just visible against the sky; far off some distant cottage windows shone like red points of light. Only over the town there was a glow, of course—that pale, mysterious glow that overhangs the habitations of men. Ben did not look much at these things as he trudged along the road, with a small and light pedlar's pack upon his back. He was not

more drunk than usual, and his legs did not tremble much; he had thought it needful, indeed, to be pretty sober to-night. But in spite of this needful precaution he did not feel at ease. He was about to meet one whom he had deceived and wronged, and there was in him a feeling that he was afraid.

What had been the career of Ben since we last saw his face, from the moment when he staggered to his home after Mr. Audley's dinner party to this night which beheld him now on his way to N— ? He had been having a prosperous time, the miserable old man— he had been in receipt of a regular monthly income, had possessed enough for food, and more than enough for drink. And yet he had not been happy—he had not felt at rest. Compelled to endure a companionship which continually frightened him, forced away from his own old home in the town he had known so long, obliged to keep up a deceit that tasked his brain, he had felt that he paid for the money that he gained. And yet, as he found his way through the night-time to the town, his principal terror was that he might now deceive no more.

It was odd what fancies haunted him in the stillness of the night, with the lights of

the town he approached in front of him—the face of his factory mother, of the Punch and Judy man, of many another vagrant he had known long years ago. He thought that he had fancies because he was sober, for that was such an unusual state with him. But always, over and above these things, the one young face remained, the face of his chosen companion, Jem Haldan's Geoff.

If Ben had been in a repentant as well as a sober mood, a state that was an even more unaccustomed one in him, that fancy might have given reason for remorse as well as fear. But it is not so easy for dead souls to feel remorse; and at least he might say that at first he had not meant to deceive. When he staggered home from the dinner party where he had been an unwelcomed guest, on that summer night when he saw Mr. Audley's face, he had not made up his mind what he should "do about the lad." He found that his room was deserted, that the captive boy had fled. And in the midst of the drunken stupor and wrath that possessed him then, there was something within him that could not but feel relieved.

The next morning he saw Mr. Audley's face again, but of that long interview he never spoke a word, though its results

affected him to the last day of his life. He seems to have found Mr. Audley alarmed and ill, not yet entirely recovered from the horror of the night, in deadly terror of what he might hear from him. Ben imagined easily what he might be most desired to say; and he had not, besides, at that moment, the power of producing Geoff—he let Mr. Audley, therefore, believe that his son was dead. But, at the same time, with his drunken skill and cunning, he hinted at darkest stories of vice and crime, tales known to himself alone, which he could publish if he would. The miserable father heard these hints in silence, but it was the silence that covers deadly fear; under these circumstances Ben made easy terms with him. He left Mr. Audley with triumphant hopes, though under a promise that he would leave the town, and took his departure that evening under cover of the night. He went to a distant town, where he had lived in his youth; and there, some days later, was found once more by Geoff.

And now it might well be asked what Ben wanted with the boy now that his triumphant treachery was reaping full reward, now that he had inflicted the injury of which he had dreamt so long. Alas! if that injury had been the only one, but our evil spirits do not

so easily let us go. Ben hated and feared the lad as he had never done before; there was a possibility now of discovery from him, and the remembrance of bygone resentment rankled still within his heart. For ever was it in his mind that he must keep Geoff in his sight, that he must never let him return near where Mr. Audley was; and then, mingled with this resolve, there came darker thoughts as well. He had described Mr. Audley's son as one sunk in vice and crime, it remained yet possible to prove that story true. For Ben kept the lowest company, and the lad was wild and young; and, as it happened, in a despairing mood as well. . . .

It is surely not needful to describe the summer farther, the first and last summer that these spent side by side, a wretched inheritance of guilt and shame to both. For a few moments, as we know, during that one moonlight night, the good angels of whom we read must have laid their hands on Geoff; he had proved himself capable of self-sacrifice. But his passionate, untrained nature had no principles to guide; he had fallen back into deeper guilt again, into courses from which it might seem that nothing more could rouse him now. His nature, indeed, was rather wild than low,

and something of refined instincts lingered still in him, but that feeling of conscious despair could but wake his passion more. Received into any society always with open arms, and forced by his miserable circumstances to consort always with the worst, he laid himself readily open to influences of ill; and the sense of degradation, once gained, is not lost again. It might well be supposed that his case was hopeless now; but for him whose good angels are lost the scourge remains.

And that scourge was to descend with all its force on him, on him who was still too young to be hardened yet to sin. It took the form of a false accusation first; at one of their lawless meetings a sudden skirmish rose, and a young man fell, stunned and injured, to the ground. Geoff had been present, and close, but he had not joined in the fight; there were those, nevertheless, who declared that his hand had dealt the blow, and he had been drinking too much to defend himself with skill. The next morning Ben came to him and told him he must hide —he was ill and miserable, and without questioning obeyed. From that time he had been skulking in various hiding places, keeping up a communication with Ben from time to time,

until at last he had sent for him to come. It was to obey this summons the old man trudged through the night. The lights of the town were getting nearer now.

It may be asked why he obeyed his wild companion, from whom he had much to fear, and had nothing now to hope; and why he was willing to place himself within his reach. There was an uneasy feeling, indeed, about his heart, a weight of terror that he could not quite explain; he felt inclined often to turn back from the town. But then the peremptory message had alarmed him too much, he felt that he must discover how much his victim knew, for he lived in a ceaseless dread of discovery from Geoff. And how much there was to find out he himself alone could tell—himself who had not been ashamed to entice a lad to ruin, who had lured him with the false hope he did not mean to fulfil, had slandered him to the father he professed to find, and had a secret, principal share in the false accusation now. He knew that Rolf was on his way down from London, and was making inquiries everywhere concerning him and Geoff; a secret mine might explode any moment at his feet. The best way was to frighten the Wolf, and he did not think that hard to do.

For so little, from first to last, did he understand the lad, so utterly removed was he from comprehending the nature of which he had seen so much, that it remained his impression that Geoff could soon be cowed, almost that, though given to bluster, he was timid and weak beneath. The wild, susceptible character had impressed his mind like that, a mistake that was not without danger for himself.

Nearer and nearer—the lights were brighter now—he could hear the distant rattle of the carts within the town. There was not a star above, and the night was strangely still; although in the autumn it was a hot and breathless night. And every now and again he experienced that wish to turn; in spite of his assurance there was a trembling at his heart. Once he did even turn round, but then he went on again. He had made up his mind as to what he should say to Geoff, so far as his drunken mind could be made up at all; he had determined to renounce at last the bait he had held so long, and, if possible, finally to get rid of the lad. He had resolved to tell him that the father he sought was dead, and at the same time to threaten him with the imprisonment he feared—in this double manner to drive him off at length.

That by such words he might rouse him to despair, that such desperation is to be feared, he scarcely thought; for although he had a vague terror, he did not define it to himself. Only he said that Geoff was "uncann'," it was well to be rid of him; "a' wish it were o'er," he said, "ah, that a' do."

Once, and once only before he reached the streets, he stopped, as a heavy rumble sounded behind his feet. But it was only a passing cart going onwards to the town. The night seemed to grow every moment more dark and still, there can be an intensified blackness at that season of the year. But the lights were shining brightly as at last he entered the streets. As he stepped on to the pavement a girl left it to cross the road, a factory girl with a dingy red shawl on her head; and, as he stood to look after her, the fancy occurred to him of his mother as he had seen her on the night she left her home. He thought he would enter a "public" to drink all such thoughts away, but there was not one near, and he went onwards through the town. He went on through dark side streets, and through darker covered ways, until he stood in the yard of the old inn at last.

An old-fashioned inn yard, with tottering buildings round it, and one old doorway with

an ancient Norman arch, and a church tower rising outside like a shadow against the sky, and very few lights within to guide the stable boys. These were gathered round a horse in the midst of a spot of light, which shone with the greater brightness where so much else was dark; the stables behind them were shadowy, and the buildings ghost-like around. Old Ben did not find himself treated with the attention he deserved; they would not leave off their work to hear his words to them, and turned him from one to the other with very scant respect. At last a trim chambermaid, who had come out from the house, remembered that a young man had arrived some hours before, and undertook to guide the old traveller to the room where he might be. She entered the house, took a candle, and went on.

Endless passages, turns, corners, unforeseen steps in the darkness, sudden doors, uneven flooring, dim lamps hanging occasionally above—the room that they were seeking seemed in the very depths of the house. They reached an old staircase at last, and went up that; a very old staircase, whose steps creaked to the tread—above all was musty and lonely; it was an old part of the inn. Still proceeding silently, they reached a door at last. Within, a wide, dark, old

parlour yawned dimly to their view, with a faint red glow upon it from the embers of a fire; a tall, dark figure was seated beside that, and was still. Ben knew in an instant he had found the one he sought.

The chambermaid went to the window, and carefully drew the blind, and lighted a little lamp on the table of the room. She was to remember next night every instant of the time that she was there; the wide, dark room, and the red light of the fire; the tall, lank figure that sat so still beside it; the old man who stood, sniffing and shivering, in the centre of the room, with his dirty, red neckerchief floating, and his old, bent legs apart. She was to remember even a certain place on the boards, the place where her feet had stood whilst she trimmed the lamp. But just at the moment she did not notice much. She went to the window, and shut the darkness out; she struggled awhile with the dimness of the lamp; and then, seeing no prospect of fees, she went on to the door. As she went down the passage she heard that the key was turned; she feared for herself, alone in this lonely part of the house, and hastened to quit the dark passages, leaving the travellers alone—alone in the lonely night, with no human presence near. . . .

An hour later, a man, who was working in the inn, was finding his way through the passages in the darkness, when he heard suddenly the sound of voices in one of the deserted rooms. They were angry, furious voices, of an old man and a young; they were raised against each other as in violent wrath and strife. And then, all at once, they ceased, and the place was still. He was so much alarmed that he turned away and fled.

A few minutes later he returned again, accompanied now by a servant of the inn. She carried a light for them; they were both of them afraid — their light went out, and they went on in the dark. When they had gone some way up the staircase they stood still. There was not a sound, not an echo, the whole place was still as death; of the voices that had been heard not a murmur now remained. For a very long while they stood listening, and then they turned away; they went down the stairs in the darkness, and closed the door beneath.

The echo of that closing door could be heard in the room above, in the wide, dark parlour where deepest silence reigned, where a dimly-seen, crouching figure sat brooding by the fire, where there was the sound of the breathing of an exhausted old man's sleep;

into that intense silence there came that closing sound. Then Geoff rose swiftly and silently from the seat on which he sat; there was no noise in his movement, his face was deadly still, his right hand grasped a hammer beneath his coat. In that silent manner, as if he did not even breathe, he stood still, motionless, behind his companion's form. The old man's head had sunk forward on the table; he put out his left hand, and laid it gently upon that. "Ben—Ben," he whispered, with a low, breathless sound; and though the words were almost voiceless it seemed that they were heard. The old man stirred uneasily, with a gasp as of one in fear, and with a bewildered movement he slowly raised his head. Then Geoff raised the heavy hammer to the full height of his arms, and struck downwards with all his strength upon his companion's face.

He heard the blow, and he felt the hammer drop; he staggered backwards, and closed his ears and eyes. A heavy figure was lying across his feet; his eyes were blinded, his ears rang, and his brain; in that moment he knew there was on him the doom of blood.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NIGHT IN THE OLD INN.

It was over—over—there was no repenting now—there was no repentance; the words formed themselves in his brain. He could neither see, nor hear, nor think, nor move away: he removed his hands, but there was no sight in his eyes; they seemed to be swimming, and his brain seemed to swim. The physical feelings of those moments are not to be described; his heart was bursting, his knees trembled beneath his weight; he knew if men came to take him he would have no power to fly. He kept telling himself that he had not known—had not known he should feel like this; he would not—would not have done it if he had known. And then, slowly,

the sight was returning to his eyes, and he covered them with his arm, lest he should see; and, as he stood thus in darkness, he wildly prayed that when he removed his arm the old man might be alive. And then, slowly, slowly, he let his arm fall at length; and he saw the dark room, and the embers of the fire, the dim lamp on the table, and the figure on the ground.

And then a great quietness all at once came over him; with footsteps that did not tremble he went to the place where the figure lay. He turned it over as it lay upon the ground; he put his hand upon the wrist, and within the clothes to feel the heart. There is no need to give one word to describe the sight he saw. Again and again he felt, as if longing to believe, as if some faintest pulsation must reward his touch at length. Again, and again, and yet again he felt, and then laid the body with care upon the ground; and, dropping his face on his arms, where his victim's head had lain, he broke into wildest sobbing—he was only seventeen.

No, there was no use in crying, he must be past that now. They would come to take him; he must be prepared for them. He got up slowly, and began to pace the room;

he sat down by the table, as if he wished to think. But he could not rouse himself, he was too much stunned for that. The pictures were watching him, the dark pictures on the walls; he could feel that their gaze was fixed ceaselessly on him. A murderer now by the law of God and man; he must expect watching, expect detection now.

Oh, he did not deceive himself, it was not sorrow that he felt; he did not repent, he had not had time for that. He had not forgiven the old man for his sins; the feelings that had prepared the blow moved in him still. But there was on him an awful sense of something irrevocable done, of a crushing weight beneath which his life lay stunned. He had never tried to do right, he had done evil things before; but from these he might have escaped; there was no escaping now.

He got up and began to walk, he sat restlessly down again; there seemed no power for action in his mind. He seemed to feel himself going on through his life with that ceaseless weight resting always on his soul, with possible detection in every glance on him. A murderer now—a criminal—there was no escaping that—there was no thought of any

excuse for himself within his heart; he was standing, condemned and helpless, before the Judgment Seat of God.

"Oh, if I had only been a better lad!" cried Geoff. "I was taught better; I need not have come to this. It's no good to think. . . . I can't do better now. . . . I might have done better once if I had chose." . . . And then, with his bursting tears, the old words came again—"If I had only once tried to be a good boy, only once!" Too late to think, there was no escaping now; there was no raising his life from this darkest depth once more; he had done the one deed that makes repentance vain. If there had been the least noise or movement he might have been roused by present danger, but there was no sound, no footstep for his straining ears to hear; he was left alone with his victim in the darkness of the night.

Yet he must move, must escape, or he would be taken now, taken on the very spot on which his crime had been committed. They would be coming . . . it was strange how dull he felt. He took off his boots, and went softly to the door; he listened, but there was not the faintest sound. A strange feeling came over him that he would be left alone

for ever, that he would not see men's faces or the light of day again. No . . . that was all folly, they would be coming soon. He stole to the door and softly turned the key ; he took up his hat, which was lying on a chair ; he went back to where the dead man lay, and looked down on him. And then, putting out his hand, he turned out the lamp ; the room was all dark now save for the embers of the fire. An awful feeling came on him, his heart began to throb, he could feel the cold sweat-drops falling down his face. With staggering footsteps he reached the door at last ; he opened it, locked it behind him, and went out. He looked, but he could see only darkness round ; he listened, but there was not the faintest echo on the stairs. He was holding his boots in his hand, that he might not make a sound ; his own footfall was all but noiseless as he stole along. He found his way down the passage, and felt it down the stairs ; at the bottom of those again he once more stood still. No, there was not a sound, not a human presence near ; the passage before him was lighted, at the further end was a door. If that should be locked ! but it was not, it yielded to his hand ; beyond was a dark side-street, with the night

and stars above. He put on his boots noiselessly, and stole out from the house. So one who for ever stands alone for his darkest, deepest crime, went out from his Master's presence, and it was night.

The lights from the old inn windows shone out into the night, the dark yard was deserted at last by the stable-boys, the servants were gathered at supper, and were very merry there; there was no one to tell that jovial, light-hearted crew that alone in the parlour above their latest guest lay dead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALECTO.

THERE is always a considerable amount of mystery overhanging a catastrophe, a brooding gloom that is rather heightened than dispersed by the inevitable noise and babbling confusion that accompany such an event, by the terror and horror of it, the multiplicity of details and of unimportant facts, the sudden springing to light of necessary or unnecessary evidence from every side. The smallest things, that none would have dreamt of noticing, become of strange importance then—the shutting of a door, the sound of a footstep, the babble of maids or men-servants, the putting out of a light—over such little details or remembrances all memories are tasked: and yet, while over

such common occurrences a lurid light is thrown, the one greater mystery still recedes into the gloom; and, even should all be discovered, remains mysterious still. For, in spite of the countless evidence that is often to be found, of the witness of history through every distant age, of the innumerable tragedies that each day brings to light, is there one who, in spite of such possibilities, can say that he has ever entirely probed the full meaning of a crime?

With such thoughts in our minds it surely cannot be needful to repeat all the words that were said when the morning's light had come, to speak of the horror and chattering that pervaded all the inn, of the gossip that rushed to the very suburbs of the town, of the silence that shrouded the room where the old man's body lay. From the chambermaid who had shown him to that room the night before, to the carpenter who forced an entrance there when they had become alarmed at last, and, who, mounted on a ladder outside the window, had seen the corpse, it is very certain at least that all had enough to say. There were precautions to be taken, and preparations to be made; a public inquiry had to be set on foot at once; the inquest was to be held

that afternoon. And throughout the whole day, through the old inn's open doors, in stables and stable-yard, in coffee-room and bar, a stream of people and of people's gossip flowed. Yet, in spite of the talk and the drinking, and the wisdom of the town, in spite of the interest that all took in the event, there were only a few conclusions that could certainly be gained—two men, unknown to the town, had arrived in the inn at night; the older man lay murdered, and his companion had escaped.

And that companion? All thoughts were turned on him, the stranger on whose young head the price of blood was set. For not the smallest doubt existed as to his part in the crime; the angry words were remembered that had been heard the night before; the fact of his flight in the darkness alone might prove his guilt. The blow might have been struck in anger, there was likelihood of that; but it had been struck with a hammer that had been left within the room, that must have been taken up with the intent to strike; and, according to medical evidence, had been struck too from behind. The event was murder—murder—there could be no doubt of it; the jury did not delay to give their verdict

thus; and before the night had commenced the police-search had begun. But of the appearance of the young man who had now become distinguished in such terrible manner there was little knowledge to be gained; he had arrived in the evening before the inn was lit for the night, and had been little enough observed while he was there; the girl who had taken him upstairs was called in to give her evidence, but she declared that she had never looked at him, and did not remember what he was like. Long afterwards, in dangerous illness, she confessed at last that she had been struck with the wretched appearance and the beauty of the lad, and had been not unwilling to favour his escape. The chambermaid, who had been within the room, also gave her evidence; but she had only observed a young figure by the fire; she could give no clearer description or more definite words than those. The police, however, had set themselves to find the murderer's track; and it was both thought and hoped that he must be arrested soon.

And now, from out of the dubious search that followed, from the unkempt mass of evidence that every hour produced, from the accounts of vagrants who fell under natural suspicion, and the results of the watching of

travellers who left the town that day, from out of these numberless reports, and fears, and gossip, let us gather a word or two that may mean something for ourselves. The old man lay in the inn, a ghastly corpse—what had been the fate, then, of one wretched living soul, since the inn-door shut before midnight had struck, and the young murderer fled away from his crime into the night? From out of such dubious materials it is hard to find the truth : let us collect, however, such few threads as we can.

A carter, who lived in the town where the murder had been committed, was driving his cart the next morning through the lanes, and was in a lonely country some twelve miles from the town, when he saw a young man who was seated upon a stone. He was driving his cart so slowly that he had time to observe the stranger ; and, as the youth looked exceedingly weary, he offered him a lift, and they drove along together "for a one short mile or twain." It was during that drive that he further observed the youth, who seemed to him in some strange excited state, and kept muttering inaudibly to himself through all the while. Once or twice he dropped asleep, but woke up always with a start, and

would look backwards fearfully, as if he thought himself pursued. The man became gradually alarmed at his strange companion's condition, supposed him to have some fever, and was glad to put him down. He left him alone in the road, and drove on some miles himself; and it so happened that in alighting from his cart he sprained his foot. The accident detained him for a fortnight where he was, and he did not hear of the murder until he got back to the town. The police gave eager attention to this slender thread of news, but it had come too late and did not avail them much.

There was one other possible evidence that was furnished later still; it was supplied by a woman who lived thirty miles away. She said that she had been standing by her cottage door that night, when she saw that a poor lad was lingering outside. He looked footsore, and wan, and famished, and as if he were utterly cast down; there was a look in his eyes like "a hunted beast," she said. She pitied his youth and condition, and called him to her at the door; and then offered him milk, which he feverishly drank at once. But, before he drank it, he looked up at her and spoke—he would not have done it if he had

not been forced, he said. She had not the very least notion what he meant. Her little child had been playing about her knees, and now became interested in the stranger lad, and held out her arms for him to take her up. He bent down to do so with a smile upon his face; and then, suddenly starting back, he "just skreaked out," she said; he cried to the child that she must not come close to him. And after that she did not quite know what he did; she believed she rushed into the cottage, and drew in the baby too; she was afraid that he was insane, and that he meant to kill the child. The idea had taken such possession of her mind that she would not stir till her husband came home from work; and then, without letting him rest, she sent him out to search. He went seeking the stranger for a while without success, and found him asleep at last about half a mile from the house. He lay by a little gate that was "close agen" a wood; he kept starting and crying out even whilst he lay asleep. And then, when the man stood by him, he sprang to his feet at once. Then he looked so fierce at first that the labourer was "skeared;" but after a while he became quite "gentle-like"—he said that he did not know where he lived

or where to go; he said that he hated sleeping, for he had such bad dreams now. It seemed to the man as if he feared the dark; and yet, though there was light on the road, it was into the wood he went. And it was in that darkness the man lost sight of him.

Yes, afraid of the dark, driven to the dark, that is no uncommon tale. For they have sharp scourges, the Furies, the daughters of Earth and the Night-time, Alecto and her sisters, from whose eyes drip ceaseless blood, who keep an unwinking vengeance for the criminals of earth, holding over their wretched bodies the terror of the law, whilst they keep their souls writhing under the more terrible scourge of God. Under such condemnation one miserable soul had come; under such doom of wandering, such helpless terrors now; the track of the wolf had become a track of blood.

CHAPTER XIX.

FLYING RUMOURS.

THE golden days of September were drawing to a close, the corn had been carried, the harvest festivals were past, the autumn evenings made long twilight above the asphalte market-place, and the lamps were lit more early to light the streets before it occurred to anyone in the town near the Fens to inquire for Ben. The stall with the green roof could now no more be seen, nor the familiar figure with the trembling, bandy legs; it was begun to be supposed that he was not coming back. Yet he had been such a familiar object, so well known to each and all, the little old man with the red neckerchief round his throat, that it was hard to believe that he would not be seen again. Some said that he must have

gone to distant parts in debt; some supposed that he had drunk himself into a fever or into lunacy at last; some imagined that he was "in trouble," and was hiding from the police. There were many remarks, but none took the pains to search; he had been too disreputable a character to be owned now as a friend, and only those to whom he owed money felt interested in him.

Towards the end of September, however, a startling rumour rose; none knew whence it started or what the truth could be. It was confidently asserted that Ben had "come in a fortin';" that he had been seen elsewhere to be living "like a prince;" and that he felt himself now too grand to return to his former home, that a house with an outside ladder for a staircase might be considered too mean for him. These remarks were received at first with the most scornful incredulity, but by little and little they became more and more believed, until at last the rumour spread out into the Fens.

"They say that Ben has some money," said Mrs. Gibson to her son.

"He'll kill himself, then, with drink," replied Jim, and the matter dropped.

The days passed onwards and the autumn

light grew scarcer, but the green stall was not raised in the market-place again. In the beginning of October, however, another change took place, for Rolf returned from London to his own old room once more. And, from the questions he asked of everyone, and the interest he displayed, it seemed as if he had come back with the wish to search for Ben.

The old house with the outside ladder had once more a tenant now, though it had been almost deserted, and appeared tottering to ruin. Rolf looked older and greyer, and more shabby than before; there seemed to be nothing about him that was too new for the place. He would not say what had become of the pawnbroking business, nor would he give any information concerning little Craw; he appeared to be out of luck, and out of coin as well.

But with regard to Ben at any rate he displayed unfailing interest; it seemed as if of the old drunkard he could not learn too much; and he even climbed up to his room, and explored its rags and dirt. And then, after that, he had tea often with the landlady, the dark woman with jewellery whom we have seen before, providing himself the tea and

brandy, too; and patiently questioning her from hour to hour. It was from her that he learned of Mr. Audley's dinner-party, of which strange story he seemed to have heard before, but the interest he felt in it appeared to be always new. By the fable of Ben's fortune also he seemed very much impressed; he said that Ben owed him money, and that he might hope to gain it now. And then for one day he was absent from his lodging, and went over to Crasten, and saw Mr. Audley's steward there. And the day after that he suddenly left the town; and it was said by some, as a jest, that he must have gone to search for Ben.

What had been his object, pursued through all those weeks, to what secret or mystery had he found the clue at last? None knew or cared to consider; he had few friends in the town, and each man had business enough of his own to employ his thoughts. Nor did any connect with him another change that came. The damp and chill of October were shrivelling all the leaves, and burning colours were glowing in the woods round Crasten Hall, when a carriage, whose lights shone in the darkness, stopped before the door one night. Mr. Audley had returned to his deserted house once more.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. AUDLEY COMES AGAIN.

It was a strange, mysterious visit, to be long remembered afterwards, that last, short sojourn of the owner of Crasten in his home.

Mr. Audley had arrived there quite unexpectedly that night, having announced his intention by telegram an hour before, and he found accordingly only the hastiest preparations for himself. The great rambling house was being prepared for Captain Holt, who was to be married in the winter, and to bring his bride there in the spring; it was full to the brim of workmen, and alterations, of tools, and fresh paint, and scaffolding, and incomplete repairs. It might have been expected that Mr. Audley would have been annoyed by these; he was more sensitive

than most men are to sights and sounds, and very fastidious always where his own comfort was concerned. Yet he did not appear discomposed, but perfectly satisfied; he accepted the hurried meal that had been prepared for him, and selected two untouched rooms in which to live. They were upstairs, and small, and uncomfortable, but secluded and remote; with a certain amount of preparation they could be made to do. And as Mr. Audley had not brought a single servant with him, our acquaintance James, who was there, undertook to wait on him. Long afterwards the man remembered what that night seemed to himself.

He came at eight o'clock to receive Mr. Audley's orders, having assisted previously to prepare the room for him. The bedroom was dark and small, with furniture that had become almost black from age; a great, red easy-chair had been added for the sake of comfort, and in that Mr. Audley was seated beside the fire. The expression of his face could not but strike the man at once—his eyes were bright and absorbed, with the look of one who dreams; they had a full and dilated appearance as they stared into the fire. So lost was he in his thoughts that, although he

had answered to the knock, he allowed the servant to remain standing at the door; and it was only after some while had passed that he slowly turned his head. But then he did not seem offended, his manner was very quiet and gentle; he appeared almost pleased to have someone close to him, and detained the man near him for some considerable time, employing him in many little offices as if he wished to keep him there.

Once or twice, after some long silence, he seemed to wish to speak. "It seemed almost like," thought James, "as if he had somethink on his mind." On such a subject a servant is only allowed to think; but it appeared to the man that his temporary master was feverish and ill, and with some hesitation he offered to remain. Mr. Audley did not hear the proposal till it had been repeated twice; he then received it with very much surprise, but it was at once evident that he was not displeased. For some while he hesitated, as if, indeed, in doubt; he appeared to long to be lonely, yet to be afraid to be alone, and he could not make up his mind to send the man away. At last he inquired with gentleness if the dressing-room had a fire; and then begged the servant to remain there for a while,

apologizing humbly to him for the trouble that he gave.

James retired accordingly into the inner room at once, not unwilling to show some gratitude by doing all he could, for his own master was never accustomed to apologize to him. He left the door ajar so that he might hear every sound, for he felt uneasy without exactly knowing why; he said afterwards that he had thought it possible Mr. Audley might "have a fit." So he seated himself by the fire in the dressing-room, and began thinking out his thoughts; and so was falling by degrees into a gentle sleepiness, when a sudden sound aroused him, and he started up at once.

It had seemed a noise as of someone falling forwards; he hastened quickly to rush onwards to the door. Only, when he had reached it, the fear of intrusion came; and he stood still by the open doorway, with his eyes on the inner room. The lamp there was still lighted on the table, the room was silent as if there was no human presence in it, but the table was covered now with some piles of plans and papers; a golden crucifix had been fastened on the wall, and there, in front of it, Mr. Audley knelt in prayer. He seemed to

have flung himself down as in some sudden passion; his head, which looked grey, was bent, and his hands were strained. And then, all at once and very hastily, he rose; he went to the table on which the papers were; he turned them over with feverish, restless hands; and then with a sudden movement he pushed them all away, and drew himself up to his full height, and spoke. It was strange to see him standing there with moving lips. James could hear the words plainly as he stood by the door—strange words, Bible words they seemed, though he did not know whence they came.

"Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He pronounced the words passionately, as one deeply moved; and then added below his breath, as if he were speaking to himself, "And Holt will have children."

He pushed the papers away; he went to the armchair by the fire and sat down there; he put one delicate, worn hand before his eyes; and then, all at once and passionately, he broke out again. The man could hear his words as he stood watching at the door;

with even more vehemence these were muttered now. As part of a sermon or of a discourse they seemed; and James remembered to have heard a servant say that Mr. Audley had "turned real pious like." And yet they seemed strange words, there was no denying that.

"Oh, men, Englishmen, and proud of the honour of your nation, is there then no appealing to you on behalf of the deserted children—of the children left fatherless, yet with fathers alive—more fatherless still for that! Oh, men, if you are men, and not animals more contemptible than the meanest curs that wander homeless in the streets, do not let inevitable suffering fall on innocent heads alone; have the courage to own your children and bear the shame for them!"

Mr. Audley's lips still murmured, but no audible sound came forth; he kept his hand always covering his eyes, and James retreated softly into the inner room again.

About an hour later he heard some sounds of moving; and, knocking at Mr. Audley's door, was admitted into his room. He was received with a pleasure for which he had not been prepared; Mr. Audley seemed to have been sleeping, or to have been almost asleep,

and to be both glad and relieved to have someone near him at last. He kept the man with him for some while, talking very fast and softly, as if he could not control himself. He said that he had been obliged to come back on account of some news that he had heard—of some very good news that he could scarce believe at first ; that someone, a relation, was alive whom he had imagined dead ; that he could now set something right that had been wrong for many years ; and so on, and on, in the same low, eager tone, until the servant prevailed on him to lie down and rest.

The man did not attach much meaning or importance to the words, to the many words, to which he listened respectfully, and he did not connect them much with those he had heard before—they all seemed to him the ramblings of a weak, disordered brain ; he did not regard them, and he did not weigh them in his mind. But often, in after years, the thought of Mr. Audley, seated, brooding, with shining eyes, before the fire, the remembrance of the watch he had held that night in the inner room, would come back to him as a strange scene in his life. He had no remembrance of secrets himself to disturb

his mind; he was happier in that than are men of higher rank sometimes.

So Mr. Audley was happy and elated, and possessed with the idea that he could repent at last, that he could set in order at length what had long been wrong, and could gain a son of whom he might even yet be proud. He was in communication with Rolf, and Rolf with him, the idea of a discovered secret held them both; they imagined themselves on the track of some final clues at last. Alas! if they had but known, whilst they sought and waited thus, to what darker secret they were approaching now; if they had known of the miserable life that was hiding now from men, they might have been eager to fly from the very track they sought. Alas for repentance, when repentance comes so late; when all that is left of our sins is the deadly fruit they bear, is the shame and the misery we cannot repent away! Hunted, degraded, fallen, in hiding now from men, insane, half-starved, with seared mind and writhing heart, the miserable criminal dragged out his lonely life, and in lonely places hid as he could from view. The awful weight on his soul through those days no words can tell, the ceaseless terror and horror of his life

he only knows who has felt the doom of blood. And yet he succeeded, and yet he was not found; and as autumn days passed onwards the search went on for him. The cold and damp days of the early winter came; he hid in woods and hovels, in such shelter as he could find; he was pining with the want of food, and pierced with cold; there was a feeling of endless darkness on his life. Let us pass that unspeakable misery with such few words as these, and turn to the one strange ray that broke the darkness there.

CHAPTER XXI.

GEOFF HAS A DREAM.

It was about this time that Geoff had a curious dream, in this same cold month of November, whilst fogs lay on the earth, though, indeed, he was scarcely aware at what time of year it was, for during the last few weeks time had ceased to be for him. He had ceased to think and had almost ceased to feel; he slept where he could find shelter, and got what food he could; he hid away, as by instinct, in plantation or in shed; he knew that the cold was cruel, and that hunger was bad sometimes; and beyond such knowledge as this he knew no more. He had kept on him, indeed, a little money to serve in time of need; he was determined not to be taken with all the strength he had; he felt that his look

was strange by the way men looked at him ; but these were but animal instincts, and they were all. They had never taken him yet ; they might never take him now ; but he must be dying soon of the exposure and the cold, and life and death were darkness, and he scarce knew light from dark. The day and the night had grown the same to him.

And yet he had observed something on that November morning when he came out of the deserted shed where he had crawled—came out, half unconscious, with his limbs sore with the cold, putting thin hands to his eyes as one who scarce awakes. The landscape had changed ; it was white with winter snow, and some thin flakes were falling from the greyness of the sky ; it did not look as it had done the night before. Geoff stood and gazed vacantly with some confused memories of a track of footsteps ; it seemed to interest him somewhat, this first snow of the year. But even that one old remembrance could rouse no thoughts in him. He went back to the shed, and gnawed a frozen crust ; he clung together and tried to warm himself ; then he fell into a stupor, and woke stupidly again. The snow had altered to rain, and the earth was changed once more. He wandered away

from the shed when the rain was done; and then, in the same heavy state, turned back to it. And then, as the night was coming, he laid himself out to rest, with his head on a pile of sacks, and his limbs drawn in a heap. He was cold—he seemed to see snow—he slept and dreamt. And now, if any object to the relation of that dream, I can but say that it is my office to relate things as they came, that the dream of that night takes its place amongst the rest. If it is called wildest delirium, that has not to do with me—it was, at least, a delirium that affected the waking life of the outcast till that life's last night had come. I can only repeat again the former words—he lay in the hovel that night; he slept and dreamt.

It seemed then to Geoff that he awoke suddenly, that he became suddenly aware he was not where he had been. He found himself lying now beneath the sky, which made an immense vastness of blackness above his head; there was no star in it, nor any light at all. And yet he could see all round him an endless waste of snow, which stretched itself away from him on every side, an endless, untrodden waste which lay white beneath the sky. There was not an elevation or de-

pression through all those ceaseless miles, there was not the mark of a footstep, not even of his own: a heavy, unbroken silence lay on both sky and earth. He thought that he sat up where he was, and clasped his knees; and sat there, looking out on the snow, beneath the sky. And then, slowly, there came upon him the feeling of an eternal loneliness; he felt that he was left there alone for ever, cut off from God and man; that no presence, Divine or human, would ever touch him more. The loneliness seemed to be in him, as it was in the earth and sky, it seemed to be even more a part of him; he knew that for ever now he must remain alone. He sat quite still there, without a wish to move; he did not complain or grieve, he was motionless, in despair. A very long while seemed to pass; he sat there beneath the sky. And then, all at once, through the silence came a voice; it seemed to come from far off, it called him by his name—

"Geoff! Geoff!"

There was not a movement in all the earth and sky, there was unbroken stillness on the great, wide waste of snow. But he had heard the voice, and he had heard his name; as one who knows himself called he rose up to

his feet. There was not a change in the whiteness of the earth, but the voice was still in his ears, he began to move. And then everything moved together, and he awoke. . . .

He was lying in the hovel, with his head on the piles of sacks; his limbs were still drawn together to get what warmth they could. He was weary, and hungry, and stiff with pain and cold; the mist and twilight of morning were in the place; a bit of the frozen crust lay beside him on the ground. It seemed strange to wake like this, and return to life again. With very much trouble, for he was stiff with pain, he rose; he sat on the pile of sacks with his clasped hands on his knees. The voice that had called his name was in his ears — it was strange that he seemed to feel that wish to move once more.

Yielding slowly to that desire, he got up to his feet; he went outside the shed, and looked out upon the land, on the heavy twilight and mists that lay upon the earth. He walked on a few steps, but he could not feel content; he returned to the shed, and sat down upon the sacks. The voice seemed to call him still. What should he do?

It was strange that, although the dream

was so present to his mind, he felt more like himself than he had done for months—and yet not like himself either, he could not understand it. He got up and moved a few steps. That was not it. He remained standing, as one who thinks or waits. What ought he to do with himself? Where should he go? He had been a murderer; he could tell himself that at last; he had been hiding, wandering; he was wretched, fit to die. Another man might be accused of the crime that belonged to him. He ought to give himself up, and attempt to hide no more—if he had done wrong he should be punished now.

It was wonderful what a calm seemed to fill his mind at once—a calm and a peace he had never known before. Without doubting further he sat on the sacks to think; with a decided end in view there was the next step still to take. He thought at first he would go back where he had been, and give himself up in the town that had known his crime. But the town was far away, and he had little money left, and little knowledge besides how to reach the place. He thought then he would try to go to some gentleman close at hand, but he shrank from the thought of a stranger, and he knew not to whom to go.

And then it occurred to him that he would go back to his home—back again to the Fens, and the place where he was known—and give himself up in the view of all men there. That seemed to be more like punishment, and it was punishment he desired.

"I shall see the old place agen—I be glad o' that," said Geoff; "an' they'll see me there, too, an'll know I've come to this. They'll tell each other, the lads will as sees me then, that for all I thought well o' myself I've got low enough at last. An' they'll say to each other they mustn't be bad like me; they'll say he's got to a prison in spite o' all he said. I won't care; I'll tell every word: they may hang me if they like. I know I deserve it; that'll make it do for me. An' then, when it's come to that," said Geoff, bursting into tears, "I may hear it speakin' 'Geoff! Geoff!' i' my ears agen."

He got up, still moving with difficulty, for he was almost too cold to walk; and felt in his pocket to see if the coins were there. Yes, they were there; he would be able to travel now. For a long while he had hid himself from every haunt of man, but that was all over; he must come now to the light. It vexed him to think that he might be

arrested in the station, before he had time to give himself up at home, but he was resolved to bear even that if it were so. He would bear everything now, "all this pain i' myself an' all." If only he did not die before he had time—had time— He forced himself to sit down and eat the crust, for he remembered that he had eaten little the last few days; and, when he had finished that, he took off his coat, and shook off some of its dust, and put it on again. It was strange to think that he might see his home once more, the Den where Jem lived, the places where he had played. He would see them once—he would try to see them once.

"Poor Ben!" he kept muttering to himself, "poor Ben! poor Ben!" And then, stooping down, he softly kissed the sacks. "I've been bad an' wicked," he said, "but I'll be sore punished now."

He felt almost light-hearted; at last he had owned his fault. He was going to be punished; he need not trouble more.

As one who obeys a call he rose up from his place, and went out beyond the shed into the morning mists outside. Was it all a delirious fancy, this new, strange will of his; or a desperate clinging to any comfort that

might even yet be found ; or the secret call of a life, obeyed at last? He did not stay to consider ; he would doubt no longer now.

He was worn and haggard, exhausted with cold and pain ; the wretchedness he had felt had been straining at his life ; but his elastic constitution had risen again once more—the strange, new hope gave him strength enough to move. With weary pain, but with courage, he left his shelter and went out in the morning mists to seek his doom. The fogs lay heavy upon the wintry earth ; the road to the station was thick with vapours—some carts were passing with a sullen, echoing sound. He would find beyond these things the voice that called to him.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FARM HEARS STRANGE TIDINGS.

THE November evening had not yet fallen on the farm; the sun was sinking, but there was bright sunlight still. It had been a beautiful day of misty sunshine and frost, and the pale yellow of the trees was distinct against the sky. There was a faint glow now over the haze upon the Fens, the first sign of the sunset that would be coming soon.

Liz had returned to the house with her hands full of chrysanthemums, whose dark red beauty made a glow against her dress: a few that were mauve and white she had fastened at her neck. They were all a present to her from the gardener at the Hall. She was bending over the kitchen table to place the blossoms there—bending with quiet move-

ments, and a grave, unsmiling face—whilst father and Jim were watching from their seats upon the hearth, and Will, who had just come in, pulled at her gown.

"Lizzie, do go to the door; there's a strange lad there," he said.

"You may tell him to go away," replied Liz, without turning round, still bending over the table with her hands amongst the flowers.

She was thinking that it was Robin, who had begged these flowers for her—poor Robin, the under-gardener, who cared for her so much. But she would never see him, or thank him; that would make him think, perhaps . . .

"Lizzie, do go to the door; he's such an odd boy," said Will; and she turned round on him the grave beauty of her face.

Her dark eyes were vacant; she was absorbed into herself, but her little brother was in an eager, excited state.

"I went to the door," he said, "when I hear him knock like that; an' directly he saw me he did stand upon his head. An' then he got upon his feet, an' said he'd good news for us, but we must give him a supper before ever he would speak. An' I said as father was saying this very last night as was as we mussen give suppers to beggar-lads as come;

an' then he did turn me a *beautiful* somersault —"

"What do ye mean by all this folly?" called out Farmer Gibson from his chair, disturbed in his placid smoking as he sat there by the fire. "I won't have ye chatter wi' beggars at the door, a-encouragin' of 'em to come here, though we've no call for them. Just get to yere books while Jim sends the lad away."

"But he says he has news, he do;" Will persisted in his words, though he made some show, too, of getting out a book. "I do wish Jim 'ud speak to him, an' ask him what he means; I think he has been in a circus, wi' horses an' jumps an' all. An' then he did talk a little"—the child's voice was lowered now—"as if there was something he did know of Geoff."

Liz had been turning carelessly, with one hand on the table, the other hand holding the flowers to her breast—the attitude suited her dark, blooming beauty well. She stood now as she had been, and her hand still grasped the flowers, but there had come a strange pallor into the darkness of her face. In another instant she swayed, and Jim hastened to her side.

"It isn't nothin'," she panted: "I'll go up

to my room—I'll lie down—I'll lock mysel' in—I'll keep away fro' him. Oh, Jim, don't let father get at him. I never knew he was near."

The hysterical, sobbing words were distinct through all the room, but the poor girl possessed no power to move away. The unnatural calm in which she had lived for months was disturbed and broken as it had not been before; and, trembling beyond control through the young strength of her frame, she let herself sink in a chair and hid her face. Jim kept by her side for support in case of need, but he looked apprehensively to where his father stood. The farmer had risen, and was standing by his chair; his figure was trembling as that of his daughter did.

"There's a lad outside as has news o' Geoff, ye say?" Go ye to the door then, Jim, and bring him in."

But Jim remained as he was by his sister's side, and Liz kept her face concealed always in her hands.

"Ye needn't be frightened," said the farmer, with a laugh, a harsh, grating laugh that sounded strangely in the room; "ye think the wild beasts 'll be on ye, maybe, but

the wolf he won't come to the door while I am here."

He made a slight movement as if he were going himself; and Jim drew himself up at that, and left the room. He had looked for a moment reproachfully at Will, and the boy stood trembling, with his lesson-book in his hand. The fire was blazing in the big kitchen grate; the room was in order, as it always was; but over the three people in it was a stillness that was strange; they had a stricken look as of those who are in dread. The next moment the kitchen door was opened again by Jim, and he returned into the room with the stranger at his heels.

A little stranger, indeed, with a queer and crooked form, and ragged garments, and a comical, twisted face. His clothes were so old that they scarcely held together; and his little, bare, bony feet made quick movements on the floor, for he had to make many steps to keep pace at all with Jim. Yet he did not seem shy or nervous or overwhelmed in the least, and got in front of his companion as soon as he was in the room. Liz raised her face from her hands, with her eyes all hot with tears; the farmer stood on the hearth, an enormous figure there; little Will was

peering with interest behind a chair; they all looked at the stranger, and then the stranger spoke. His voice had a childish, cracked treble, although his face was old; he spoke with an amount of assurance that seemed surprising to them all.

"I'm Craw. I've somethink to tell you; and I want some food," he said.

The rest were astonished, and would not speak to him.

"I'm hungered," said Craw; "ye might give a bit to eat."

He put out a hand like a monkey's to give his words effect. But no one spoke or moved, they were all too much surprised. Then Jim went up to the cupboard, and took out a piece of bread; and the boy began eating ravenously, as one well-nigh starved for want of food.

The autumn evening was closing into gloom, the yellow November mists looked cold and dim through the uncurtained window. With a quick twitching of his eyes, as if he could turn them in his head, the little beggar kept looking out at them.

"He's out there, som'ere," he said, "an' starved wi' cold, I doubt; we've been looking for him a long time, Rolf an' me. There's a

genelman as pays Rolf to try an' look for him. But we don't understan' it, Rolf an' me, we don't; we think as there's summat wrong, or he'd never hide like this. We've been looking for him"—he paused to munch his bread—"an' it's only just now as we've heard of him at last. We've follered him all the day, and we've never found him yet. He's got down to these parts at least, we're sure o' that; and Rolf he's sure as he's heard of him near the farm. An' so we thought"—munching—"as he'd happen come to ye, for it's oftens I've heard Geoff speak of ye when he lay ill on the floor. He said as there was a girl as was very fond o' him, an' so I thought it like as he'd certain come to her."

He stopped for a moment, but there was silence in the room: Liz kept her head bent, and no one moved or spoke. He blinked round on all of them before he spoke again.

"An' I thort as ye'd happen be kind—an' there's Rolf, he'll pay ye well—if ye'd on'y just let us know if ye see or hear o' him. He'll come wi' the night, most like; he'll be near here by now."

As he said the last few words he looked round on them; but still no one spoke, and there was silence in the place. A heavy

silence it seemed which no one dared to break. Then slowly, and as if with an effort, Farmer Gibson moved; he took up the hat which lay near him on a chair; he took up the heavy whip which was lying by his side, and, as one who moves in a dream, he went slowly down the room. He did not speak to the stranger, or seem to think of him; he seemed not to see the room or the others who were there; his eyes were wide open, and vacant, as if he were walking in his sleep. He passed them without a word, and went slowly from the room; the outer door closed behind him; he went out into the mist.

Then there met for one instant the eyes of Jim and Liz, full of deep agitation both, and of a suddenly startled fear; for one single instant only their glances met, and then Jim turned and followed his father from the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FARMER GIBSON MEETS THE WOLF.

JIM remembered that evening afterwards with strange distinctness all his life — the misty November evening, chill, and dim, and grey; the trees and the Fens wrapped like phantoms by the mist; the clinging cold and the damp that hung to eyebrows and to lips; the feelings with which he had followed his father from the door. He had been ill all that day, and had been resting in his home; perhaps that helped him to feel as if all this were a dream.

They were out in the road, walking there, his father and himself; the grey vapours hung round them and on the fields on every side; the road was lonely, and there were no travellers there. The farmer took heavy

strides and went silently along; it was not easy for his son to keep pace with him. They went side by side without looking at each other, and neither of them spoke a single word. The road was wet and heavy with mud beneath their feet, but that mattered little to footsteps strong as theirs. They went down it for nearly half a mile, then the farmer turned into the lane that led towards the town.

And then Jim remembered afterwards that he had tried to think, to consider what he himself ought to say, and what to do; but that it was all of no good, he could not calm his mind for that. All sorts of verses and scraps kept floating always there, songs of the foundry workmen, or bits of hymns taught long ago; or he could see the fireside where he had sat that afternoon, or the little house he was preparing in the town; it seemed as if he could not control himself, and could only think of these. He had even to keep himself from speaking now and then, as if his mind, being disturbed, kept tossing up thoughts and words; he had to restrain himself from saying that he was on half-time now, or that he was glad that Elizabeth was always good to Will. And yet, although all

these matters possessed the surface of his mind, there was the feeling always beneath that he might see Geoff again at last.

And with that there came ever the memory of an evening long ago, a wet, chill twilight, that was grey and damp like this, an evening when he had brought his companion into the farm to warm himself, and had observed for the first time with alarm how his eyes met those of Liz. . . . A year ago, even less than a year from now, as it was less than a year from that other morning on which the blow had been struck that had scarred his face for life. He could see the great kitchen now, with the firelight on the walls, the slender lad with his dark hair wet with rain, his friend, his chosen companion. . . .

The farmer suddenly stopped short; the vision faded, the sense of dreaming fled, he was standing shivering in the mist by his father's side.

In another instant he heard the sound of footsteps, too; from round the corner, for there was a turning in the road, another wayfarer came along the path to them. For that moment or two they could see him as he came, a tall, bent form, with a weary, slouching look; he was coming along the path with

tired steps. He looked ill, and ragged, and pale, with his long dark hair unkempt; yet he was not a beggar either, for he did not attend to them. He had nearly reached them when he suddenly stood still; then he raised his eyes to look at them, and Jim knew that it was Geoff.

A terrible knowledge that, coming so suddenly on him; for that one dreadful instant he could not control himself. His knees knocked together, his heart was beating fast, a sudden and sharp exclamation crossed his lips. Geoff himself had stood motionless, paralyzed, from that single glance at them; but, on hearing that sound, at once he tried to move. He moved on quickly; he tried to pass by them, but before he could do so the farmer seized on him.

"Aha! an' I know ye now; I know ye now," he cried. "Ye needn't hope to escape me this time, wi' all your ways. I can see yere face now—the boy as spoilt my Jim, the lad as we warmed at our fire, an' as took my Liz fro' me. Go back to our fireside now, wi' this—an' this."

The heavy blows fell with a crushing, awful sound, distinct in the lonely twilight as strokes of doom.

Geoff had not stirred, had not moved hand or foot; he stood with his arms hanging downwards whilst the blows fell on his face. For one instant after he had received them he remained so, standing still; then a sudden, strange pallor overspread his face; and, as he swayed sideways, Jim caught him in his arms, and, supporting him as he fell, sat down with him on the ground. The farmer stood choking with rage, with his whip clutched in his hand, storming out "that he knew better, he knew his tricks an' ways." At every moment it seemed he would strike again, though his foe lay before him, helpless, on the ground.

"Hold hard!" cried Jim, in an agony; "don't hit a lad that's down." But at these words Geoff roused himself, and feebly stirred, murmuring that "It did not matter, he might do what he liked to him."

With some exertion, for he was all trembling still, he withdrew himself from Jim, and stood up upon his feet. The sudden movement had roused the farmer's terror; he expected the leaping passion he had known so well of old.

"Aha! ye'll be on me now," he cried; "ye'll be on me now."

He raised his whip—Geoff stood still with

hanging arms—he struck him across the shoulders with all the strength he had. Geoff did not move; he looked at him, and faintly smiled. The farmer stood still in his turn; he himself was trembling now.

In another instant Jim had seized the whip from him, had bent it, broken it, flung it across the hedge; and with the grasp of his strong young arm had drawn his companion to his breast.

"Go home," he said, hoarsely, to his father. "Leave us; go home." And as one moves who is stunned, Farmer Gibson turned away. He stood still again after a while, and looked at them; they were upon the ground once more, and Geoff leant against his son. He partly turned, as if he would come to them; and then suddenly, as if afraid, he rushed away. The two who remained were scarcely conscious of the fact; they sat and clung to each other, and Geoff gasped with weary sobs. It seemed like a dream to Jim; he was there on the lonely road, with the misty twilight around him, and his enemy in his arms.

"Be you very much hurt then, Geoff?" he asked tenderly at last; for that weary, terrible sobbing seemed to tear at his heart.

But Geoff was beyond all power to stir or

speak; he lay on the young man's shoulder as one too weak to move. Jim kept an arm round him to keep him where he was; he took the thin hand now and chafed it in his own. And yet with these kindly movements, and with these tender words, there was a feeling that was not tenderness rising in his heart.

"Geoff, be still, can't you? Try be still," he said at last, though speaking, however, very gently yet—with one so weak, so prostrated, in the protection of his arms, it was not possible to be otherwise than physically kind. Geoff did try, and try hard, and yet he could not be still, after every moment of silence the sobs caught his breath once more; it was not till he was exhausted that relief came to him at last. That prolonged struggle with anguish had been hard enough to hear; there is something terrible even in the crying of a child.

"I can go—I am better," he murmured, at last; and, withdrawing himself from Jim, he sat up upon the road. For the first time Jim was able to see him now—the wasted features the strangely-altered form. Could this be the village hero of a few short months ago—this outcast creature with vacant, staring eyes, with dark, matted hair falling all about

its face? Jim was seized with wonder and horror, and with bewildered sensations too, as if that which had been familiar was becoming strange to him.

"Where be ye goin', Geoff?" he asked at length, with a wish to break the silence at any rate.

But Geoff did not answer at first or turn his head; he sat with fixed, staring eyes looking out into the mist.

"I'm goin' to the Lord," he said, in a voice that was not like his own.

And Jim almost started, so strange appeared the words. And then, with another effort to throw his feelings off, he laid hold upon the thin shoulders with a not unkindly grasp.

"Ye be dreamin', lad; do ye know me, then?" he said.

And with a more sudden movement Geoff turned and looked at him. There had come a gleam of recognition like brightness in his dark eyes; for that one single instant he appeared more like himself.

"Oh, yes, I know ye; I know quite well," he said. "Ye be Jim Gibson, who I struck o' the face."

Jim thought he would now be expressing

some sorrow for the fact; but, having said those few words, he sunk back in thought again. It was only after awhile that he began to speak once more, in a low and dreaming tone, as if he were talking to himself.

"It has cut me a good bit," said Geoff, "to see th' old place agen. I never thort as I should feel it quite like this. I wish it wasn't November; I should like to see the spring, when the little flowers get out, an' the birds ha' made their nests. But it isn't no good sayin' that, I must take what I can get. I heard 'em say when I came as old Jem was dead, an' as Bill-be-Hanged was dead, an' the rest were gone. But I think as I'd like to see the Den agen, though my little bed's not there, nor the eggs and books I got. It's taken me many days to get down to these parts now; I've been so ill like, and it hurts my feet to walk. But I've seen Crasten village, an' I'll see Hanorth too; an' then I'll get over to Bennon by the morn."

Again there was silence, but Jim waited still for more. The low, rambling voice was painfully strange to him, though there seemed to be some connection in the sentences it spoke. A few moments passed before the

next one came—Geoff sat as he had done before, looking out into the mist.

"I'm goin' to gi' mysel' up; I've done a sin."

There was a long silence.

"I'm a wicked lad," said Geoff, "but the Lord He cares for me. An' I don' care now, I will go on to the end. There's one as wishes to speak to me; Rolf, he told me that. I'm goin' on now; ye'll hear no more o' me."

Yet he kept in his place, staring out into the mist. Jim had risen from the road, and was standing now by him. His one word came in a trembling murmur then—

"Geoff!"

There came no answer; Geoff sat still where he was. His eyes kept their fixed expression; they were staring at the mist. It seemed as if he were scarcely able to hear or understand, but his companion's anxiety compelled him to speak once more.

"Geoff, is it anything bad—maybe very bad—ye've done?"

There was still no answer at all, though he thought Geoff seemed to hear. What occasioned his reticence is hard enough to say—the shame and horror, perhaps, of the feeling of his crime, or even the mere desire not to

reveal that crime too soon. Jim waited and lingered for tidings, but he could gain no more; that one dark tale remained always sealed to him. Instead of that he heard many words from his companion's mouth—from the lips, so pale now, that had been once so free of speech; but what their meaning was it was difficult to know. Geoff rambled of angels, and music, and voices calling, and the love of the Lord for him, remaining still on the ground as if he did not know how to move.

The cold was intense in the winter evening gloom, and Jim became vexed and almost in wrath at last; and yet he had gathered—what was certainly the case—that cold, and exposure, and misery had done their work on Geoff, the poor lad's brain was almost past reasoning now. But that did not make what he said always possible to bear.

"The Lord loves me—He loves me!" cried Geoff, with a light in his sunken eyes.

Jim stooped towards him, and touched his shoulder.

"Geoff, come to the farm; come in out o' the cold," he said.

"The Lord loves me," repeated Geoff, in

insisting, triumphant tones. "He doesn't care what I done, He cares for me."

"Ye must repent, then," said Jim, with abruptness in his voice. "It's all very well to talk so, but ye must be sorry first."

"He have called me," cried Geoff, with the strange light burning now. "Ye don' understand what I mean—He've happen not called to ye Hissel'."

Jim did not, indeed, understand, and was much vexed to find himself displeased; he tried to tell himself that the lad knew not what he said. And at any rate he must endeavour to be kind, for his old companion was sunk in trouble now. He tried hard to persuade Geoff to rise and come with him, promising to secure him shelter and to pay for it himself; he was much alarmed to observe how weak he seemed. But he entreated in vain; Geoff would not hear what he said. It appeared that he had met Rolf —who Rolf was Jim did not know—and that he had promised to go to a certain place for him. He told all this in broken words that were hard to understand, and then he began to talk once more about his arrest: "he must give himself up 'the morn' next day," he said. He seemed to be greatly excited

over that. And then he became alarmed lest anyone should be near, and Jim offered to go to the end of the road for him. Jim went reluctantly, troubled in his mind, uneasy, uncertain what course now to pursue. He stood at the end of the road with his arms upon a gate; it required an effort to make himself turn at last. He returned with slow footsteps, fighting with himself; and found the road lonely, and his companion gone.

It was late that night before the farm-door opened, and Jim came in with slow footsteps, worn out with fatigue and cold. He spoke a few words to Liz, who had sat up hours for him, and promised to tell her more when the next morning came. Then he took a candle, and went up to his room—the little room he was used to share with Will. The little boy lay there now in a happy, childish sleep: Jim set down the candle, and began to walk once more. Once he paused before the glass, and glanced slightly at his face; and then began to walk again, with lips yet more hard and stern. He had seen his old companion, his old companion now; he had always imagined Geoff would tell him when they met.... Then he heard his father moving, and went down the stairs to him.

* * * * *

"An' so ye couldn't find him agen, Jim," said Farmer Gibson to his son.

They stood in the great, dim kitchen, lit only by one candle on the table, side by side.

"Ye looked for him through the lanes, an' could get no sight o' him. I'm sorry for that —I be sorry like for that."

He stood silent for awhile, with his huge hand on the table, and seemed to think. His ponderous brows were deeply contracted; it was evident that something unusual was working in his mind.

"Jim, I be sorry," he burst out then at last; "I wish as I hadn't hit him acrost the face like that; but I never thought as he'd stand so quiet to me. I've been mad wi' the hate o' him through all these months—I've thought o' him allays as dancin' in his sins; it never seemed like to me as he'd get so low as this."

"There's a day that I'm minding, Jim," went on Farmer Gibson still, "a day that is years agone, though ye'll happen mind it too. I came in the evenin' to see ye i' yer bed, an' there was a little dark lad as lay i' bed wi' ye. The missus had put it there 'cause it come in cold an' wet. An' I thought it did look so pretty, a lyin' there wi' ye."

"We'll do our best for him, Jim," the farmer still went on, "because he's eaten and drunk wi' us oftens at the farm. He can't never come here no more, for the sake o' Liz an' Will, but we'll try an' help him a bit in spite o' that. If he's gi'en hissel' up, as you say, for somethink bad he's done, we'll gi' a bit money to get lawyers like for him. An' then, when he's free agen, we'll try an' set him up; it may be acrost the seas, where he'll do none harm to us. I feel a bit better when I talk like this to ye; I've had a big weight o' my heart for a weary crowd o' days. . . . An' then it'll happen come easier to be kinder like to Will. . . . Well, good night to thee, lad, my lad; I'll not keep thee from thy rest. I'll try an' be sayin' 'Our Father' by my bedside to-night, it's many an eve since I've done that wi' comfort like."

And he went off with heavy footsteps, and left his son alone.

Alone in the kitchen, walking restlessly up and down, in such insufficient light as the tallow candle gave—alone, and tired, and in conflict, discontented with himself. Oh! what was the matter with him that he could not be resting now? Oh! why must he tell himself, as he still paced up and down, that it

was easier after all for his father to be kind—his father's face was not injured like his own? He did wish to be good and generous, to forgive with all his heart, but it seemed to him that Geoff had no need of that—he felt forgiven, and happy, and contented in his mind; he claimed rich spiritual treasures, and was quite content with them.

"'The Lord loves me—He loves me,'" Jim repeated to himself, and smiled with bitterness at the persistent thought that, miserable as he must be, Geoff claimed saintliness at last. In whatever he did or attempted he would always claim the best; this was now a new assumption, he would claim to be best in this.

Alas! it is ever thus—it is ever thus with us. The elder brother remains outside the house, he thinks it a mistake in morality to welcome the prodigal's return. The religious frenzies of criminals have little sympathy from us; it is the cant of their position, if not its delusion too; we think it would be beneath us to be interested in them. We think ourselves far more worthy, who have not strayed from the path; we are sure that the fatted calf should have been reserved for us. And yet, from the safer position of our securer

lives, can we grudge even these their consolation—even these?

"I'll try an' be better," said Jim, "I don't feel right this night. I'll talk to Elizabeth, for she knows more nor me; she'll say where I'm wrong, an' put me right, maybe. An' there's little Will, too, he's not troubled to forgive: I'm better than he is i' some things, but he's the pull o' me i' that. I've home, an' t' new home, an' Lizzie; it's not for me to be bad."

So he went up the stairs with a lightened heart again.

And, meanwhile, whilst he laid himself down by his brother's side and slept, some sorer sins than his own were claiming vengeance. For, whilst he had sought Geoff through the cold and misty lanes, his old companion had stolen silently away, and in the increasing darkness had found his path with care—the path that would lead him to one who was waiting then for him. He found it at last—the bare hovel that stood in the misty field, the large, rough cow-shed that he had known of old, for he had entered it sometimes to play wild games with Will. The night was dark now, but a lamp hung from the roof inside; it must have been

placed there on purpose, for it had not been there before.

He entered, and closed the door, and fastened it carefully. He looked all round him with searching eyes for Rolf; the place seemed empty and silent, there was no sound of life.

And then, all at once, from a corner, a figure came to him—a tall, dark figure that was not that of Rolf. It came forward silently, and stood in the centre of the shed: the light fell upon its head, on the brown hair streaked with grey. It looked at the wanderer, their eyes met each other, there fell silence upon both. This was not the meeting with an old companion—*this*. They stood together at length, the father and the son.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. AUDLEY MEETS HIS SON.

THERE was silence; they looked at each other. They stood close together — the gentleman and the vagabond; neither spoke. Mr. Audley's lips moved now and then, but no sound came from them. The light from the lantern above showed the pallor on his face—a ghastly pallor as of one who is struck with death: his beating heart spoke in the fluttering of his breast. Yet he was making great efforts to control himself, and at last a murmur came —

"Who are you, and why have you come here to me?"

"Rolf said as you wanted to see me, sir," said Geoff.

His voice was low and clear, as it always

was, and he raised his dark eyes with firmness as he spoke. At the very first tone of his voice Mr. Audley seemed relieved, perhaps because in his state of horror any voice had a welcome sound, perhaps because of a more refined accent than he was prepared to hear. Yet he seemed still trembling, and horror-struck, and his eyes wild with dismay; the sight of the figure in front of him must have been too much for him.

"And who are you, then?" he asked, in a low, hoarse voice: he could no more control his accents than he could subdue his beating heart. His companion answered with more composure than himself, composed, perhaps, by the sight of the agitation that must have been visible to him.

"My name is Geoff, sir; they call me Jem Haldan's Geoff."

He felt Mr. Audley's eyes were upon him as he spoke.

Like one possessed with a nightmare Mr. Audley looked at him—at the tall, lank figure, the worn and ragged clothes, the sunken face, the dark mass of tangled hair, the eyes of feverish brightness that were sunk in hollows now. It was not such a face and form as he had been told to expect; he

felt like one struggling in shadows who is losing hold of life. Yet his voice came with accustomed gentleness when he spoke again at last.

"Do you know who I am? Have you seen me before?"

He had been looking at his companion, but the lad now looked at him.

"Ye are Mr. Audley, of Crasten, sir," said Geoff.

And his dark, strange eyes seemed to burn as they sought his companion's face. This was not like a common beggar, at least—at least.

"I have seen ye once. I've heard of ye often whiles."

And then he was silent again, but as if he wished to speak.

They stood still, facing each other, and motionless and pale. Some consciousness, common to each, seemed to hold the breath of both—to judge from each miserable face, some consciousness of pain.

The outcast lad twisted his fingers till they looked strained and white; the throbs of Mr. Audley's heart could be seen even through his coat. It would seem as if each was waiting for the other one to speak. Geoff

had lowered his eyes once more, but he raised them again at last.

"I thort . . . I had better see ye . . . afore the morn," he said.

Mr. Audley's eyes looked his question, but he could not speak a word; and his companion felt that question, but he did not reply.

It was the older man who spoke, when again a while had passed. He had first to moisten his lips, so dry they were. The next words required terrible courage, but he spoke them all the same.

"Do you know—why I wish to see you?" he asked, very gently still; he was struggling to overcome all the repulsion that he felt. He had come here to do this thing, to repair his fault at last; and this miserable creature, this degraded creature was . . . With all the horror and the loathing that he felt there was something, unfelt before, that was struggling now in him. It was strange that he could not rest on the thought of imposture now; some mysterious feeling of likeness had laid its hold on him. . . .

There was again a pause before Geoff spoke once more; he was more agitated now than he had been before; a weight seemed to be on his eyelids, and the blood rose in his face.

As he stood, with his eyelashes drooping, and that colour in his cheeks, there was something at last of a look of wasted beauty in his face, though the livid marks of the blows made it unspeakably vagrant still. His voice came at length in a murmur that was low and faltering.

"I thort . . . there was only one genelman . . . as 'ud be carin' to look at me," he said.

He looked up as he spoke, their eyes met—held each other—and Mr. Audley cried out to him—

"I am your father!"

It was done—the words were spoken; there was no retracting now. The first step upon the road of restitution had been taken, the first and the hardest, the rest must follow that. Mr. Audley went on speaking in broken accents to him.

"I know—you have reason to blame me, I have long done you wrong," he said; "but you cannot know—my excuses—I will tell you all some day. And, indeed—I am truly prepared—to do my duty by you now. I will help you—will educate you—will do all I can for you. You must begin another life—you must try and help me too."

The broken murmuring of those agonized tones had ceased; but Geoff remained silent, looking on the ground. He seemed lost in thought, to be almost stunned with thought. And then suddenly he looked up, and sharply spoke —

"Did ye wed my mother, sir?" he abruptly asked.

Mr. Audley looked at him, and then answered —

"Yes."

Let us do the miserable man the justice at least to own that, though he felt all that was involved in the admission he had made, though he knew himself to be cutting his last safeguard away, a feeling of shame would have kept him from a denial to his son. He waited a moment, and then he spoke once more. The words came with an effort, but he did speak them still.

"If it is only possible—possible—I will make you my heir."

There was silence: Geoff looked on the ground; he appeared to be struck and stunned. At the first moment he had received the words with a long breath like an "Ah;" then he stood with his head bent down as one resting from a blow. And then, slowly, on

his thin face a dreadful pallor came; and with a slow, strange movement he raised his head once more.

"It's too late for that now, sir—it's late—it's late," he cried.

There was silence between them until he spoke again, but a silence so terrible that the very air seemed full.

"I'm goin' to gi' missel' up the morn, I am."

Still silence; the air in the hovel seemed to be becoming denser now.

"For murder, sir," said Geoff.

There was a long silence. Then Mr. Audley stepped forward as if he could not control himself. He was trembling all over; his breath came in a cry; his face was quivering, a dreadful sight to see; as one in some mortal agony he stretched out his arms and hands. His words came with fearful rapidity, but as if each one were a cry.

"For murder . . . murder . . . at your age. . . . It is impossible. . . . Oh, may God preserve my reason. . . . It is impossible . . . my son. . . ."

"If ye'd brought me up in your house," Geoff replied, with quietness, "ye'd happen a known a bit better what your own son could do."

The words sounded like a reproach, and Mr. Audley turned on him. He was past control, mad with anguish, he could not restrain his words.

"You need not blame me," he cried out, "for all the vileness of your life, for the degradation in which you have steeped my name. Before God you are answerable for your own sins yourself—I refuse the weight of them; you shall not lay it upon me."

"Ye have let go the weight o' me through all my life," said Geoff; "ye have left me for seventeen year to the devil and missel'."

They stood facing each other, silent, staring, one and other deadly pale, the miserable father and son; the light shone down on them. It was Geoff who took up the word after some time had passed again. He spoke slowly and sadly now, as one too worn out to grieve.

"I'll go, sir, an' do what I said; there is nothing left for me. . . . I've been allays left to missel' sin' the day when I was born; I'll go an' be hanged; there is no one cares for me. . . . An' so I'll not trouble ye more, ye'll not hear o' me agen. . . . An' I'll look to not shamin' ye further, ye needn't fear for that. . . . I'll not mention your name, for I'm none so proud of it!"

"Do you speak of my name," cried Mr. Audley, in a fury, "when it is you who have plunged it for me into unredeemable disgrace? And yet I am willing to help you, to do all I can for you . . . for you who are wretched, and criminal, and *tried* to ruin yourself. There was no necessity upon you to sink so deep in guilt; the blood you have shed is upon your head, not mine."

"It's damnation on both on us," cried Geoff, starting up, for such seemed the movement by which he flung himself to his height, "The Lord'll be judge atween us when it gets as far as that. He'll say if there isn't a burden of all my sins on ye—on the grand, fine genelman as lived dainty by hissel'—on ye as could care for yer dogs, but give no shelter to yer son."

His words fell like sparks; they appeared to burn like fire—Mr. Audley stood silent as one whom the thunderbolt has struck. Like the movements of helpless paralysis there came twitchings of his mouth; there came little quivers in his hanging, trembling hands; but save for such motions as these he could give no signs of life; there remained no power within him to speak or stir. What his wretched son felt could be told only by his breathing, the deep, heavy breathing that

quickly came and went. But his passionate utterances had entirely exhausted him; it was in a changed manner that at length he spoke again. The sound of his voice had become low and broken now, with the weary fatigue of a tired and punished child, or of one who has given up life, and has become too tired to care.

"I'd better be going," whispered Geoff; "we'll not do no good at this. . . . There isn't no use in our gettin' angered now. . . . It's like as it's right what ye say, sir; ye should know more nor me. . . . I reckon I'm bad all through me, an' allays must ha' been. . . . But I wonna trouble ye further, ye'll hear no more o' me. . . . I ought for to thank ye for all ye meant to do. . . . We can't do no good to each other, you nor me, but I'll get away now, an' I'll not hurt ye no more."

He whispered these words, but continued standing there, as if there were left in him little power to move. Mr. Audley stood by him, breathing heavily; a feeling that these were last moments had come to both. Then there came over Mr. Audley a horrible sensation—a sensation that it is far easier to feel than to describe—a feeling of yearning father-

hood such as he had never known before. He longed to put out his arms, to speak, to clasp his son; and yet he could not, both arms and voice seemed held. A black gulf seemed to divide them, to part them each from each; he could not get over it by voice or action now, could not even cry out to relieve the anguish that he felt. And then a strange dimness seemed to veil his sight, though through that dimness he still could see his son. Their eyes met; they looked at each other. And then, with a quiet movement, Geoff slowly raised his hand; he raised it to his head with the motion of a village lad who salutes a gentleman, and turned away. . . .

When, within an hour afterwards, Rolf entered the shed, he found Mr. Audley lying senseless on the ground. He could not revive him to consciousness with any efforts that he made; and was compelled, in spite of utmost reluctance, to call for help at last. Some men from a cottage near supplied a shutter, and lent their strong help to place Mr. Audley upon it. So, lying helpless, inanimate, with no faintest sign of life, he was carried away from the hovel into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CLERGYMAN AT BENNON.

INTO the darkness! and into deeper darkness too; they are not easy to bear with composure, the chastisements of God. To no soft and gentle repentance would the wretched father wake, to no voluntary penitence, made light with care and skill, the iron hand of remorse has no grasp so light as that. One scarcely dares to think what that waking must have been, what ghastly phantoms must have attended then, what remembrance of horror, and what crushing sense of doom, of life-long calamity that could be shut out no more. But it is not with Mr. Audley that we need concern ourselves; the steps whose track we have followed are hastening to their

close. With such information, then, as we can gather here and there, let us follow the last few actions of poor Geoff Audley's life.

It was on the morning after the night whose strange story we have heard that the Rev. James Colliner, the owner of Bennon, a landed proprietor, who was somewhat literary as well, and who possessed on his estate the comfort of a large and profitable farm—a gentleman, consequently, of some note in the district, and very popular besides—came downstairs at ten o'clock to take his morning meal. He was a large and loosely made man of very comfortable appearance, a widower now for some years (not less comfortable, perhaps, for that), with all the signs about him of a very easy income, and with none of the wrinkles that attend on work and cares. Indeed, in his early youth he had once possessed a curacy; but he had resigned it on obtaining his small estate, finding it necessary to devote himself to the duties concerned in that. It would appear that these duties had not been very heavy, and no doubt that freedom from toil had increased the comfort of his life. A clean-shaven, portly, middle-aged, and comely-looking man he was—for the rest, an honourable gentleman, kind and generous enough.

The Rev. James Colliner, then, such as we have described him—it was better to give his portrait before relating the morning's tale—came leisurely down the stairs towards his morning's meal. After a night of pleasant sleep, and a not too hasty dressing, the thought of coffee and sausages can produce a soothing feeling, when accompanied, too, with the thought of some other things as well—the morning letters, agreeable to a gentleman without duns, and the morning newspaper, sent over from the town. The November daylight, moreover, gleamed brightly through the mists, through which, from the church near at hand, came the chimes for ten o'clock. The Rev. Mr. Colliner felt very bright and hungry, and was coming downstairs with a lazy, cheerful stride; he had reached the lowest step, and his breakfast was very near, when his housekeeper came with an anxious face to him. There was such a very strange lad awaiting in the study; he had said he must see the master on a matter of life and death.

And, meanwhile, whilst the owner of the house stood arrested on the stair, a little startled, and very impatient, too, the fire in the study was burning cheerily, and the un-

welcome intruder was standing close to it. He was trembling with cold, and was damp with morning mists, but a tremor of conscious excitement lay beating at his heart. To him these moments were deeply fraught with doom; his toilsome journey was over, his last sight of the Fens, the terribly painful interviews that had disturbed the night before—these things were ended at length, and he had passed through them all, and could fulfil the one final purpose on which he had resolved at last.

The fire burned brightly in the little, cheerful room, and cast a bright glow upon walls all lined with books. He stood by the fender, and felt himself in a dream; he was faint with cold and hunger and with deep excitement too. He could feel his heart beating in heavy, steady throbs; he had never known it beat in that way before. His journey had been so endless, he had almost lost hope at length, but it was ended now, and he had really come to this. . . .

Ah! ah! a footstep, the time had come at last, the gentleman was coming, he must think what to say. Only he could not think, could not calm himself for that. He stood by the fire . . . it was pleasant, being in a dream.

. . . And then the door opened quickly, and he advanced.

And now they stood by each other, the gentleman and the boy—the comely, middle-aged man, with his surprised and kindly glance; the lad with his sunken face and feverish, hollow eyes. Geoff had tried to prepare his appearance to the best extent of his power, but his means were limited and there was little he could do; he had only combed with his fingers and pushed back his tangled hair. Yet he stood straight up now, as one does who is resolved; and met the gentleman's glance with his sunken, burning eyes.

"I think you wished to speak to me, my lad," said Mr. Colliner, with some not unnatural appearance of alarm upon his face.

Geoff still looked anxiously at him, at this man, his chosen judge; a chair had been set for him, but he would not sit down. He tried to speak, but his heart beat—no words would come.

"I was told," said Mr. Colliner, "there was something you wished to say." He spoke kindly to him enough, there was nothing harsh in him. Geoff made an effort, but he could scarcely speak even then.

"Are you a magistrate, sir?" he whispered faintly, the heavy beats of his heart giving his voice a broken sound. Yet the effort had greatly relieved him; he felt in himself more power to speak.

"I was once a magistrate—what do you want with me?" There was a shorter pause this time before the answer came.

"I want to gi' mysel' up," said Geoff, with firmness now.

"To give yourself up? I do not know what you mean."

"I want to gi' mysel' up—I've killed a man."

Mr. Colliner never in all his life forgot that moment, the terrible statement that was so quietly made, the strange eyes and sunken face of the criminal self-confessed. For one moment, as he felt afterwards, it took all his breath away; then, recovering himself, he spoke quickly, kindly still.

"You have killed a man? You are very young for that!"

"I'm not very old, sir; I was seventeen last spring." He looked so young still in form, in spite of his wasted face, that the clergyman felt again that his breath deserted him. But his duty called on him, he was sensible of that; for he had some impressions

of duty, this easy-going man. So, summoning his severity, he told his companion to sit down; and, sitting down opposite him, drew a little table near; then, speaking again, and in a severe manner still, he desired his companion to tell his tale to him, so that he might make a written statement when what he had said was done. He had imagined that this preparation would alarm and awe the lad; but his companion seemed only anxious to collect and arrange his words.

"Am I to begin with my name, sir?" he asked very quietly; he appeared to be desirous to do everything in form. Mr. Colliner nodded to him; and he went on, pausing a little now and then that he might select his words. The manner in which he spoke made such an impression on his companion that many years after that day he could remember the words he said.

"My name is Geoff Haldan. . . . I was brought up near here. . . . This thing that I did was in September last—it was on Tuesday, September fourteenth, about ten o'clock at night. . . . It was in the inn o' the Dragon, in the town o' N——, in ——shire. . . . I had come there that night . . . they didn't know me there. . . ."

His voice became broken, and his colour came and went, his agitation was becoming apparent now. But the calmness with which he had uttered the first few words he said, and the careful circumstantiality with which he had given names and dates, dismissed the idea of delusion from his companion's mind; he could only listen in growing horror to the tale. He sat feeling the point of a quill pen upon his finger; whilst the low, broken voice went on still with its words.

"I was to meet a man, sir, that night, as I had known, a man as had been doin' a deal o' harm to me. . . . I had made up my mind to hurt him i' some way if I could; I'd got so miserable I didn't care what I did. . . . An' I got to the inn afirst, an' was left there in a room alone . . . an' I'd seen a hammer outside, an' went out an' fetched it in. . . . An' then he come to me, sir, as I sat there by t' fire an' kept the hammer all hid aneath my coat. . . . An' he talked to me, sir, an' laughed an' jeered at me; he was a bit frighted, although he jeered so much. . . . He said as he'd made money by me, by tellin' lies o' me; he said as my father was dead, an' I needn't seek him now—he said as he'd known how to treat me, an' done what he

liked wi' me, an' I might go now to the devil, for he wouldn't help me more. . . . An' he said a lot more beside, sir; but I needn't trouble you. . . . An' then I kept thinkin', it kept workin' i' my heart, as he'd left me nothing but this one thing to do; it worked i' my brain till I couldn't keep myself, I kept thinking allays o' the harm an' wrong he'd done. . . . I'd made up my mind, like, but I couldn't move my hand; an' still it kept workin' an' tearin' at me then. . . . An' he got tired, an' fell sleeping i' the chair; an' I got up fro' where I was, an' took the hammer fro' my coat. An' then, as he moved an' looked at me, I struck down on his face. . . . I struck it as hard as I could, I didn't want to strike him twice. He did not move again, sir; when he fell he was dead." . . .

"You struck him like that, and a sleeping man and all!" Mr. Colliner had started in his excitement from his chair. "Why, help and preserve us, boy, that's *murder*, you know it is."

"I know, sir," said Geoff; "I did come to tell you so."

With a curious instinct he had risen from his chair, he felt that a self-confessed murderer has no right to sit down. Mr. Colliner was standing and staring now at him,

with a horror and repugnance that were not to be repressed. His voice, when he spoke, was hoarse and had sunk a note in tone; he averted his eyes from his companion now.

"Are you aware of the punishment," he said, "that is provided for acts like yours?"

"I know, sir," said Geoff, very quietly; "I'm quite ready to be hanged." With a sudden, sharp movement Mr. Colliner turned to him; he had not expected that answer, as it seemed.

"Oh, come, now," he faltered, "that's rather strong, you know; you have confessed, after all, and they won't hang a boy like you. And I suppose you had temptations, and all that sort of thing. It will be penal servitude for all your life, more like."

"They wonna hang me?" Geoff whispered to himself. His face had fallen, he appeared struck with dismay. Mr. Colliner was rather uncertain in what way to answer him.

"They may do so, of course, I will not say they won't. But they will take . . . into consideration . . . the excuses that might be made. . . ." He was divided between his good-nature and the repugnance that he felt, and considered it best to stop short his answer there.

"I'm sorry for that," murmured Geoff. "I'd lief be hanged. But I'll take what is gi'en me, an' do the best I can." He appeared very anxious not to seem to claim too much. Mr. Colliner's sense of horror forced from him one sentence more.

"I will not tell you," he said, "that you do not deserve the worst." He thought it his duty to make that one remark, but he was surprised at the quietness with which it was received.

"I know, sir," said Geoff, very humbly; "I do think that mysel'. An' will you please to put it i' writin' now?" He seemed much relieved now that he had confessed.

So the clergyman put it in writing, after he had drawn his inkstand near; whilst Geoff stood still by the hearth, and looked in the blazing fire. He tried to stand, but his knees shook and trembled, and he was compelled to sink into his chair at last. Mr. Colliner watched him furtively during the minutes whilst he wrote; it all seemed to him like some bad, bewildered dream. But he made the statement, and made it exact and clear; and then gave the pen to his companion, who signed his name.

"What am I to do now, sir?" he asked,

getting up again, and standing with his arms hanging and his eyes upon the ground. Mr. Colliner stood to consider. What *should* be done? He was not accustomed to such an interview as this, and he felt entirely miserable and perplexed himself. He had been a clergyman and should have been a spiritual adviser, but it was rather strange that no spiritual words would come.

"Do you wish to add anything to what you have stated here?"

"No, sir."

"Have you anything to ask of me before I give you to the police? For that is my duty, as I must tell you now."

"I know, sir," said Geoff; "I'm quite prepared for that. . . . I should a liked to a seen my home agen. . . . It's the place, sir, I mean; there isn't no people there. . . . I wanted to get to it, but it was too dark last night. . . . But I'll do what you please, sir, it's just whate'er you like. . . ."

"It is quite impossible that I should let you go: I must shut you up in a room, and send for the police at once. . . . And yet I have a day's journey, and *must* leave home to-day. . . . I might keep you until to-morrow, and drive in with you to the town. If I let you go I

should never see you again." Geoff made no answer, he continued looking down; and yet there was something in Mr. Colliner that smote him for his words. For he was such a lad, this criminal . . . he began to pace the room.

"Is it very far off, this home of yours, you know?" He stood still abruptly by the criminal's side once more.

"It's a two-three mile," Geoff answered sorrowfully; "it ud' take me a good bit to get to there an' back. I don't know why I want to see it, but there's the trees I used to climb—an' I should like to get over to Crasten an' see the cricket field an' all."

"And if I were to let you go you would not come back again?" There was a little pause, but the answer came quietly then.

"If you tried me, sir, I'd come back unless I died." Mr. Colliner began again to walk up and down the room.

"Well, *go,*" he said; stopping abruptly short once more, "I don't know if it is my duty, but I won't refuse you that. And come back to me in the morning, and I'll take you to the town. Remember I trust you, I expect you to come again. . . . I suppose you repent of this fearful crime of

yours?" A little while passed before the answer came.

"I don't know about that, sir; I do the best I can." And, very slowly and quietly, he turned to leave the room.

Mr. Colliner could not but notice how wearily he moved, as one who is faint or exhausted and has scarcely strength to walk. Through all the repulsion that he could not but feel a sense of compassion rose still within his heart.

"You seem very tired. Have you had any food?" he asked.

"No, sir, not this morning, not much for many days. I spent the last bit I had o' yester-morn."

"Ah, really, sit down then, I'll order some for you." But Geoff shook his head, for the first time with a sob. He sat down, however, for it was difficult to walk, and Mr. Colliner rang the bell and ordered wine. He poured out some sherry as soon as the glasses came, and set it with a biscuit by his companion's side. Geoff ate and drank slowly, for he was almost too tired to move; but the stimulant did its work, he appeared revived again. Mr. Colliner had sat down, meanwhile, and had watched him eat and drink,

and had thought that upon that hand that held the glass— He was astonished to find how strong that feeling was, for he was a good-natured man who was not easily impressed.

"There, there, that will do, you will be better now," he said. "And now take these coppers," which he laid down by him. "You need not hesitate, I mean you to take them; they will serve to provide you with the food you want to-day. And now give me the glass out of which you drank;" and, taking it from his hand, he dashed it down beneath the grate. The ring of the shivering glass made strange echoes in his ears; but Geoff only stood quietly, with his head hanging as before.

"And now you may go. I shall expect you to come back."

The lad slightly moved his head, and then went on to the door. But Mr. Colliner remembered that at the door he paused, and stood still, trying to speak with his white and trembling lips.

"I do want—to thank you, sir," he whispered below his breath; and then turned away —to be seen in that place no more.

In after years, with that light of intenser

wisdom which always illumines for us an event that has been passed, Mr. Colliner, looking back on this strange scene in his life, lamented greatly the folly that had let the criminal escape. But it is not so easy to judge wisely at the time, our pity bewilders us, and our surprise as well; we are not always collected enough to be masters of ourselves. I suppose that the clergyman had been overcome by the scene; he certainly failed in discretion, if not in duty too, and, though he was never willing to own himself in the wrong, it is believed that he often looked back on his want of caution with remorse. We will hope the event served to teach him that men should choose their steps with care, and that even an act of pity may be an imprudence too.

However this may have been, there was something else it taught him; a deeper, more inward lesson, not so easily described. He had been a man who had lived an easy life, who had owned pleasant things all his days, and been pleasantly content. I do not and will not say there was harm or wrong in this; but it is true that advancing time showed a certain change in him—a subtle change that was visible in his manner and his words, as if a cry from outside had pierced to his life at

last. Once he told a friend that when he saw November mists the thought of "confession *in extremis*" rose always in his mind. And those words—which the friend, by the way, could not understand at all—must have referred undoubtedly to that past scene in his life, to that time when a miserable soul poured its burden out to him—a soul that had long been called suddenly to that Highest of tribunals, before which it is well to stand with no sin left unrevealed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST EVENING.

ONCE more, for the last time, we must follow the wolf's track through the snow; the line of the footsteps we have traced draws near now to its end. But of that last day, till the evening, we can gain little knowledge that is certain; and, after subtracting such evidence as is undoubtedly untrue, must be fain to content ourselves with the remnant that is left.

One thing on which all are agreed is that it snowed that day, that it snowed very heavily sometimes as if winter was come at last. The mists that had wrapped the twilight cleared off in the morning hours, and there was an interval of white clouds and blue sky, after which the rising wind brought up the snow. It was a day of intervals, such as one sees

sometimes, of whirling snowstorms and bright sunshine in between, a day of lights and shadows, and of quickly moving clouds, keeping thus on the whitened landscape a look of continual change. And then as the day drew to evening it cleared and softened, and the mellow sun shone upon the November mists with the golden glow that precedes a winter's night. All this then is clear—so much as this, at least—but we look for details that are left vague for us.

In after days, when interest was awakened, and when parts of a painful story had been held up to view, when, moreover, one lurid night had shone in the eyes of all, and had forced the abiding interest that a catastrophe can bring—in those days men became more disposed to seek and question, and to discover how Geoff Haldan had spent the last few hours of his life. In that day before an end —which was not the end he sought—there were, indeed, a few who saw him even before the evening came; and under the influence of remembrance and of fancy there were many others who believed they had seen him too. The result of this was, of course, that a great deal too much was remembered, that he was proved to have been seen conclusively in more

than one place at a time, and that out of the eager bringing forth of facts it became more than ever difficult to ascertain the truth. But that interest died away, as in time such gossip will; men became no longer desirous to have seen the wolf at last, and it became more easy to gather the few facts that remained. Placed side by side, and in order, these same facts read like this—

At nearly eleven o'clock, when the first snowstorm had fallen, Geoff was seen by a countryman in a lane near the farm. The man had but recently come in those parts; he did not know the stranger and had not heard of him before, but he was struck by his singular appearance, which he afterwards described. It would appear that, on leaving Mr. Colliner, Geoff, instead of going on to the waste, had gone back into the Fens—he had been haunted possibly by a desire to view the homestead, and perhaps also to catch a glimpse of Liz or Will. The homestead he may have seen—we do not know that he did not—but Liz lay ill in her room upstairs, and Will was away at school. He did not try to meet the boy as he had once been used to do, he seems to have turned away from the Fens towards the waste.

It must have been towards noon that he entered a village shop, the shop of an out-of-the-way hamlet that lay some miles away. It lay so much on one side that it was out of his way as well, but he seems to have taken that trouble that he might avoid being known; through the whole of that day he must have shrunk from view. He bought there some bread, and also asked for milk; he looked wan and tired, "fit to drop," the woman said. She noticed his thin, sunken face, and the marks upon his cheek. She asked him where he was going, and he said "up Hanorth way;" she asked then if he knew the way, but he smiled and said no more. Standing carelessly in the doorway, she watched him when he went. A great storm of snow-clouds was gathering in the sky; he went with quick footsteps down the lane towards the waste.

And from that moment at noon we know very little more; save only for one slight indication from a very doubtful source, we know not how he found his home, or how the sight affected him. That indication comes from the story of a woman, who was crossing the waste that day when a heavy snowstorm fell—a real tempest of snow that drove her to seek shelter where she could, and forced her

even to the refuge of the deserted Den at last. What occurred in that place she would never exactly say, she had been terribly frightened, and had rushed out in her fear —she declared that some animal lay in the inner room, that it was crouched up upon the ground, and that as it lay it moaned. And yet it was not an animal—she would not say it was. It appears that she thought it was a spectre there.

Alas ! no spectre was needed in that dreary home of ill, no wraith but the phantoms that haunt a wasted life in that house where the lessons of evil had been so aptly learned. Let us leave its sole occupant to lie lonely on the ground, the bitter remorse of that hour needs no spectator's eyes. In the gathering darkness of the winter afternoon a darkness of deeper anguish must have lain within the Den—we have nothing to do with that, we will pass on, and let it pass.

For slowly the heavy storm wore itself out at last, leaving the country white and the roadsides deep with snow. It must have been heavy walking for a wayfarer that day, even to one who was helped by complete knowledge of the lanes. But in the advancing evening the sun came out at length, a

mellow glory of sunlight lying level on the snow. It was a most radiant evening, as all remember well, an evening that bathed Crasten village in its yellow sunset glow, that shone on the red tiles of the simple village roofs, and was like a glory to the trees behind the church. Was Geoff there to look once more on the cricket-field again, to see the trees he had climbed, the stone-pit where he met with Will? Had he gone through the lanes in the glory of the evening, and felt how much radiance even winter hours can own? We may suppose so, since we know that he reached Crasten; but the darkness of night was on it before he first was seen. He must have kept himself secret, and must have shrunk from view; the village people had no thought that the wolf they had chased was near. We may imagine his thoughts in those old haunts of his childhood, but of his movements no trace can now be found.

It was another surprise that startled the village people, that forced them out from their homes into the winter night again. The winter evening had fallen peacefully on all; the villagers sought their cottages, and lights gleamed out in the streets. And then, in the midst of the night, a sudden rumour rose, and

spread rapidly through the village, till the children woke in their beds, till the women rushed in their excitement to the windows, whilst the men poured out in a stream into the street. It was towards the park that rapid feet were hastening, towards the dark park whose branches were black in the night; for behind those branches a lurid light spread quickly, and already a reflected glow had caught the sky. Already it began to be known, even before the news found words, that the great house of Crasten, Mr Audley's house, was on fire.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FIRE AT CRASTEN.

THAT fire which alarmed the village on that dark winter's night, how had it been able to rise? We must go back for a while. Only it is not so easy to go back to first causes when there may be reasons for concealment of the truth; for many an event that remains still shrouded in mystery has been carefully veiled at the time that it took place. That terrible conflagration, long remembered in the village, must have owned some origin to which its rise was due. But the owner of the place had no real means of discovery; he was away at the time, and there were only servants in the house.

For Mr. Audley had not returned again, and had sent word that he was coming back

no more. He had gone out on the previous evening for a night-walk, as it seemed, and had been taken ill when he was some miles away. He lay now in a farm-house, at some considerable distance, to which he had been removed from a hovel where he lay fainting on the ground. There was some talk of fever, and of delirium too; in some form or other it was certain that his health had given way. And he had sent word that he would certainly not return; he meant to go back to Langen as soon as he could move.

No doubt there was talk over this, for servants will talk and gossip; it may have been to that conversation that the great fire was due.

For it chanced that there were many servants at that time in the house, some servants of Mr. Audley and of Captain Holt as well; for the Captain had sent an intimation that he was coming with his bride. He was coming with her and her parents, and with some other friends, in order that some final arrangements before the wedding might be made; and he had been very desirous that before the ladies came the house should appear to have been prepared for them. It was for that reason that there were several

servants there, and that there were a few workmen also in the house; and Mr. Audley had left it in the night-time, so that the servants might be said to have the place to themselves. Rolf and Crawfish had been there, but they had also left; they had left on the night on which Mr. Audley went.

And so—we have said that the servants were left entirely to themselves—and so it might seem to be natural that they should have some fun. Long after the night of the fire a few confused stories rose, some stories of eating if not of drinking too, some vague tales of merriment, of a supper and a dance. If the servants had thought that evening that they would have a meeting, that they would discuss their masters' affairs, and have some mirth besides, and if, acting upon this principle, they invited the workmen too, I will not say there was anything that was not natural in that. It does not appear, however, that there was any hint at such doings in the account that they gave themselves when the fire had taken place.

On the contrary, it seems that they had all been most decorous, that the evening had passed as usual, and that they had retired to rest. There were two of them, however, who

lingered late downstairs, a footman of Mr. Audley, and one of the grooms of Captain Holt. These men were passing along one of the passages, as they said, when they became suddenly alarmed by the sight and smell of smoke. It would appear that they set themselves to investigate the cause, but they could not, indeed, remember very clearly what they did. A workman, who came downstairs when they rang the bells at last, found them staggering and incapable, confused with smoke, no doubt.

No matter, the alarm was raised; and it soon spread through the house, and aroused the servants from out of their beds upstairs. But some of the servants were sleeping heavily, and others, although awake, would not seem to understand; it became a difficult matter to rouse and collect them all. When at last they were fairly startled there had been long delay — the rooms below were burning, and the passages filled with smoke, there was no longer a doubt that there was fearful danger near. Then there seized on these men and women that sudden, hideous terror which attacks human beings who are in danger of their lives—a frenzy possessed them, they flung open doors and windows,

they rang the bells loudly, and wildly screamed for aid. At last, under the guidance of those more self-possessed, they rushed in a body, still screaming, down the stairs. The hall was burning, and was filled with densest smoke, but in one of the passages was a door into the garden; they pulled at the bolts and lock, grasping, tearing at each other, and, almost falling upon each other, rushed out into the night.

It was time, for a few minutes later might have been fatal, indeed, to them; the flames were fast gaining possession of the ill-fated house. From the drive, upon which they rushed, the red light was plainly seen, it glowed in the windows, and was reflected in the sky: the entire left wing of the house had been caught by the flames, which were rapidly spreading themselves over the whole front part as well. From out of the windows they had opened proceeded clouds of smoke; and the leaping flames were curling round the house. They stood on the carriage drive, a half-dressed and frantic crew, with the noise of the rushing fire within their ears; too stunned, too frightened, too excited by the peril to consider how they might avert it, or devise some means of help. It had all come

so suddenly on them, they were not prepared for it; they could only stand wringing their hands and helplessly watch its work.

But one of the workmen had rushed into the village, and an excited crowd was gathering in the park. There had come a cry for ladders, but none had thought to bring them; and some men rushed back to get all that could be found. There was no fire-engine that was nearer than the town, but a man volunteered to ride at full speed for that; and some had the courage to procure water from the yard, although from the burning house there fell showers of sparks on them. It was useless—all useless—as if the buckets were drops of water; and the fire-engine was far away, too far off to come for help; and, meanwhile, above all the voices and the movements of the crowd, was the noise of the roaring and rushing of the flames. The quick wind was urging them, they stretched towards the sky, they raised themselves up and fell back in showers and sparks. Not an atom of property had been rescued from the house, but the flames were so rapid that none dared enter there.

It was at this moment, whilst all stood still appalled, whilst the rushing destruc-

tion proceeded on its way, whilst above the flames and the gusts and bursts of smoke rose the terrible glory of the fire-glow in the sky — it was at this moment, whilst the crowd of men stood helpless, that another more dreadful idea found a voice and words at last. It began to be whispered about amongst those who stood and looked that the burning house was not empty after all. For two lads were missing who had been sleeping there; they had never been seen since first the fire began.

It is not possible to describe in words the horror, the violent excitement that this new idea produced. The women cried out and called frantically for help; the men were seized as with madness, and a tumult rose at once. The groom, James Ash, who had been sleeping in the village, and who had rushed down, half-dressed, in the darkness, through the park, after having helped vigorously in the vain attempt for water, tried in vain now to calm the excitement as it rose. It was afterwards said of him that he was the only man self-possessed, but his attempts at questions produced little good result—none knew of the boys or where they had last been seen; they had certainly slept in the house,

and they might be sleeping still. There was a louder cry for ladders, but there were no ladders near; the flames were still leaping onwards, and the two lads might be there. The violent excitement now rose like one great cry; as that sunk into silence another voice was heard.

"Let me get to t' house, an' I'll get up there to them." Then, as all turned round in an instant, they saw amongst them Geoff.

There was no leisure for surprise or for questions how he came, such moments of peril have no time left for that. He was standing amongst them as they stood on the lawn—a surging mass of dark figures in the red glow of the fire. His cap had fallen, and his black hair was bare; he seemed to be wild with excitement, if not also with delight. The very appearance of this too-well-known figure, the supernatural reputation for daring he had gained, his wildness of courage which seemed all alive just then—in the agony of that terror these things gave quick relief. All pressed upon him, advising, urging too—he would lose his life, there was no good in the risk; there would be no chance, he'd be lost in smoke and fire; there were no ladders, he would never get in the house.

"I donna want 'em," cried Geoff; "I'll get in the house wi'out."

He had flung off his jacket because it held his arms; his shirt sleeves were rags, and his arms looked lithe and bare. It was impressed upon all, his look of wild excitement; he appeared to be ready for any adventures that might come. And that daring courage revived and cheered the rest, it seemed that the matter was not so hopeless now. He rapidly scanned the house with a quick and piercing glance; he advanced towards it, and all pressed on with him; they all reached the drive and then suddenly drew back—it looked so awful, that mass of smoke and flames. Geoff had gone straight onwards, then suddenly turned back too. For one instant he stood quite still, and cried hoarsely out to them—

"Give my love to Will Gibson—to little Will!" he cried.

Before even the words were ended he had flung himself on the house; he had seized a creeper and swung himself up by that. The men on the lawn and drive held their breath as they looked at him, the gusts of smoke kept obscuring him from view, the light boughs bent and gave way beneath his weight; at

every instant it seemed that they must catch fire or break, but he left them no time for that as he swung himself aloft, caught hold of a pear tree bough that was underneath a window, and in an instant was standing in the red glow of a room. The room only reflected flames, it had not itself caught fire; he stood in the window of it and waved his arm. Then the sight of the room and the lonely figure there, the glorious courage and the quickness of the lad, produced their effect on the multitude outside; and, as they saw him wave his arm, a ringing cheer arose.

In another instant another cry was started; the much-desired ladder had come indeed at last. A dozen strong hands seized on it as it was brought near the house, and in the course of an instant it was set up against the wall. It was barely set there when a gust of wind came quickly, and the top of the ladder at once was wreathed in flames; with a sudden terror, for which they were not prepared, the men who had grasped it retreated back again. But the flames fell back, or were swept back by the wind, and in the next instant a voice rose like a cry.

"I'll come to ye, lad"—it was old Mick's voice that shouted—"I'll come to ye thruff

the fire; ye shanna burn up there alone. We'se do the best by oursels, when the two of us are there—I know the young devil—he'll stan' the flame wi' me."

During all the while he shouted he had been climbing up the ladder, quite hidden from view by the heavy gusts of smoke. He had just gained in safety the window-ledge he sought when the ladder slipped sideways and fell crashing to the ground. For one instant those who rushed forwards saw him stand in the room with Geoff; then the thick smoke covered the window, and the crowd saw them no more.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WOLF IS TRAPPED AT LAST.

THE account of the remainder of that terrible adventure can only be given from the remembrances of Mick; and if those remembrances are confused and broken it is no wonder—he could not look for more.

It appears, then, that when the old man found himself in the burning house with Geoff the two set themselves resolutely to work to find the lads they sought. No easy task truly was that, in the midst of smoke and flame; but, though choked and half-blinded, they did the best they could. By the means of some stairs at the back which had not yet caught fire they found their way through the smoke to the servants' rooms

above, and began pushing their way through these, shouting every now and then. They did not speak to each other, could scarce see each other's faces; they had to crawl sometimes to get a little air to breathe. There was about them what Mick described as an "awful" noise, the sound of the rushing flames, and of falling beams and wood. Once the fire caught the cord of a great picture on a landing, and they had only just time to avoid it as it fell down. But they went on notwithstanding always; they had not time to be afraid. Into room after room they penetrated, amidst growing heat and smoke; the rooms were so dark they could scarcely find their way; they scarcely knew where they went or what they did. And meanwhile from without came a surging cry of voices; the people were shouting, imploring them to come back—to come back—come back at once; it would be too late for them. The voices reached to them through the rushing of the flames; half-blinded, suffocated, scarcely conscious of their actions, they turned at last to get back where the voices came. They reached a room that had still remained untouched; they could hear the sound of the pursuing fire without. Outside the window

the flame had caught the ivy, and was licking and curling all round the window frame. They crossed the room quickly and reached the further door; they opened it, to be driven back by the smoke. The fire was there, in the passage, between them and the stairs; they shut the door hastily lest it should get in on them. Then, surrounded, enclosed by flames, with no hope of safety near, they stood by each other, and their eyes met at last.

"We'll be in kingdom-come in a two-three-minute, Geoff!"

And Geoff replied —

"We've been in worse places."

He had been excited, but he was quiet then and pale. They spoke no more words to each other; they had not time for that: they mutely resolved to make one effort more for life; then they opened the door and let in the clouds of smoke. Mick determined to rush down the passage if he could, only just at the starting point a new notion seized on Geoff; he grasped his companion's arm, and he pointed with his own. It seemed from his gestures that he wished to go back upstairs, to go up to the attics, where they had not been before, leaving his companion

to find his way below. The old man could not remember exactly what passed then: they had a kind of struggle, but Geoff got away from him ; he found himself left in the passage there alone. And then he got down it somehow ; he could not tell how it was ; his excitement was failing, and he was seized with dreadful fear. He got into another passage, where there was an open window, and people were shouting, crying out to him to come : they cried that there was not time ; that he must come soon—at once. He rushed back again through the passage, and screamed out loud to Geoff. The passage was becoming a gulf of smoke and flame ; the people were shouting, calling . . . he tried to get back to them. And then, as he reached the window, a sound struck on his ears—it was but the church clock striking, but it seemed some call of doom. He lost all his nerve, all his courage ; he reached, fainting, to the window ; and, as strong arms stretched out from the ladder, he swayed and fell. For a moment there seemed a sight like the burning in his eyes, and then all grew darkness around him. . . . He knew no more.

That was old Mick's tale, told still now that years have passed : there remains no

need that we should add many words to that. The story that we have followed found its terrible close that night, as all men recognized who saw the charred and blackened *something*, which was dragged with pain and trouble from the ruins of the house next day. The lads, whom that one last effort had been vainly made to save, had left the Hall for a spree on the evening of the fire ; and, as strong men dragged out that *thing* beneath the ruins, they knew that the young life it held had been flung away in vain.

Ah ! too fit ending for the lost and wasted life, for the life that, like its remains, had been blackened and defaced. Yet men buried reverently the little that was left, remembering the daring courage that the one last action showed ; and Jim helped to carry the coffin with an uncovered head ; and little Will stood by the grave, and wept and sobbed. There was a quiet funeral, for which the parish paid ; and the clergyman promised to raise a simple stone ; and many there were who gazed curiously in the grave before they all turned away and left the wolf to rest. For, lost and terrible as that last ending seems, it was yet as fair a conclusion as could have been hoped for Geoff. Some praised his daring ; some

reverently pitied him ; there were only a few who murmured that "the devil had claimed his own."

So the spring returned and brought new life to the villages ; there would never be any need to chase the wolf there again. The wildest stories about him were spread from mouth to mouth, but the feet that had been so nimble would leave no traces more.

One story there was that did not find its hearers, locked up in one miserable breast from which it dared not pass. Mr. Audley did not return either to Crasten or his home, and he did not venture to visit the grave that held his son. He went abroad for his health, and abroad he chose to live ; living simply and quietly, and saving up his wealth. It was said that he wished to endow a great home for foundling children ; he was so absurdly given to self-denial, men said. But one other thing he did, which was to heavily portion Rolf, and to educate little Craw, whom he took away from him. There may have been special reasons for that latter act of his, for Craw had been one of the few who had been gentle to his son.

Once, after some years, when he was taken very ill, Mr. Audley sent for Sir John Horley,

his old friend, to come to him. He must see him at once, there could be no delay, he wrote; there was something he wished to tell him, that he must confess to him. Sir John Horley came and went, and looked solemn and portentous, but never chose to reveal the secret his friend had told. If it was really the life-long burden that had been committed to his care we will hope that one miserable soul had found some relief at length. For there is some relief in confession, however trivial it may seem; it is those who are silent to man who feel most condemned by God.

Mr. Colliner made in due course his statement to the police, but very little public attention was paid to him or it. The people of Crasten and Hanorth continued to talk of Ben, and they even got up a rumour that he had been killed by Geoff; but the rumour died away, after the fashion of village gossip, before any had taken the trouble to ascertain the truth. There were many strange deeds and wild stories that were fastened on the wolf; it seems strange that in this one instance they should have stopped short of the fact.

And, meanwhile, all the summer beauty had been ripening in the Fens, and the water in hedgeless ditches shone beneath the

summer sun. We must suppose Jim safely married and settled in the town, with his little brother at home with him, for his wife had asked for Will. Elizabeth took up dress-making, for she could not sit with idle hands; and she persuaded Jim that it was needful, since they "must support the child." We may add that she did support him with all the comforts in her power; and that though with succeeding years many other children came, and filled with bright faces and voices all the corners of her home, until there seemed to be light in every dark place of her heart, and, moreover, though those same children had no cause to complain, she yet gave the most tender affection to the one she did not own. Jim often observed in reproof that she was "fair spoiling Will;" but he brought up his brother himself with severe though kindly care; so, in spite of the tenderness of Elizabeth for the lad, we have reason to hope after all that Will will not be spoilt. As he grew to be older, indeed, Will had good hopes in life, for Captain Holt had a great regard for him.

And so we return once more to our last thoughts of the villages—of Crasten and Hanorth as they lie in the summer evening

radiance, with the golden glow upon the church tower or spire, upon the wide Fens, which stretch far around them both, and on the green graves where the grass grows rank and long. A peaceful sight that makes in the golden evening light. The dark branches of the trees in the park cast a shadow on the road; beneath those dark branches the villagers will chase the wolf no more.

Have we then no parting words for that one poor, wasted life, so deserted by others, so hurtful in itself, so little favoured with light to guide its steps, and yet still so often faithless to the little light it had? The wild stories of farm and village give confused memories of Geoff, his very tombstone bears a name he did not own; but we, who have really attempted to trace his broken life, what comfort have we to feel as we pause now by his grave?

Some comfort, perhaps the greatest, only comfort, as we think in Whose hands such outcast lives are left, into what clear light of unerring, calmer judgment they pass when the voices of earth at last are still for them. For what does the world know of secret resolutions, of delirious penitence, and of

strangely formed resolve? As little as it can tell the vast excuses, the strength of inherited evil, the temptations of a life. Let us pause, and humbly, before such graves as this, with renewed resolution, and yet with pity, too; with a strong resolution against the evil of the world, and yet with as strong a pity for the defeated lives of men. It may be that sometimes the Greatest of all Masters, finding in some of His poor scholars no strength to do their work, and yet pitying them for the punishments that the lesser teachers give, determines to end the matter by calling them to Himself. That call of a violent death seems strange, sad enough to us; it strikes on our senses as if it were some fiery doom; and yet in some cases it may be one of mercy, which, recalling the sinner from a world once loved too well, brings back the lost soul once more to the feet of the Bridegroom. So may it be.

THE END.

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